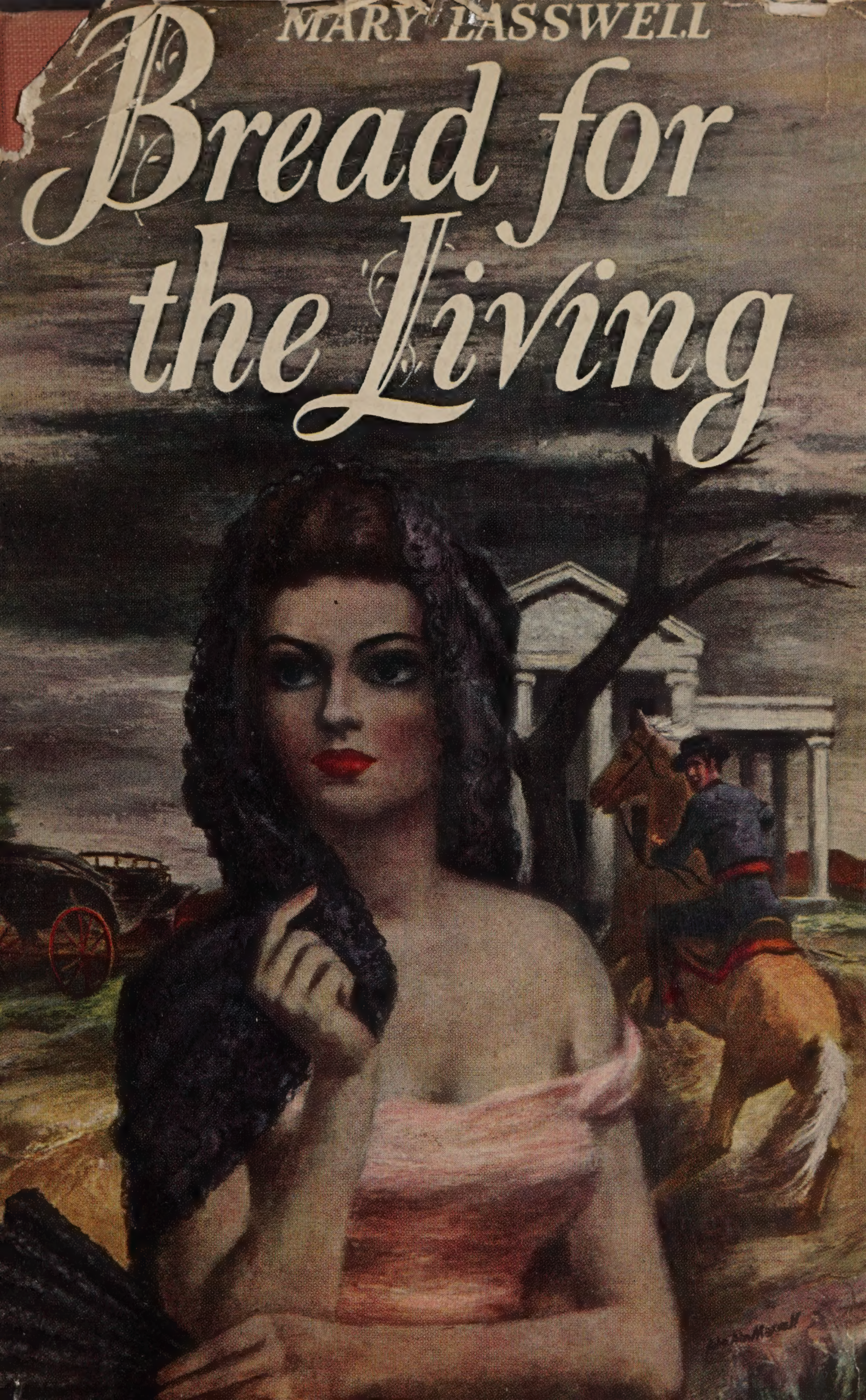
MARY LASSWELL

Bread for the Living



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Bread for the Living

Mary Lasswell

Mary Lasswell shows her versatility by writing this serious novel inspired by the scene in which she grew up. This is the story of a woman whose youth, beauty, and wealth closed, rather than opened, doors. It is the story of her finding the key with which to unlock them. Raquel, beloved only daughter of an Irish father, rushed into a wild love match and thus into the haremlike civilization her father wished to spare her. In the early years of our century the "border" between Texas and Mexico

Continued on back flap

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Bread for the Living

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Suds in Your Eye

High Time

Mrs. Rasmussen's Book of One-Arm Cookery

Bread for the Living

Bread for the Living

MARY LASSWELL

Houghton Mifflin Company Boston
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For Lass

Bread for the Living

* * *

RAQUEL O'RIORDAN wondered if the hot smell of dust would ever leave her nostrils. She sat facing her father in the carriage that rolled along the Mexican roads from Monterrey to Matamoros in the state of Tamaulipas. The team of bays ate up the ribbon of road in front of them at such a pace that the sierras around Monterrey were now only a memory. Soledad Romero, the girl's nurse-governess, sat straight as a ramrod beside her. She was forty, beetle-browed and austere.

Raquel looked at her father lovingly. He was immaculate in the sweltering May noon. She thought of how black Patrick Joseph O'Riordan's hair had been until he was fifty – black as her own. She smiled to herself and her father raised an eyebrow at her.

"I was wondering about the silliest thing, Father. Wondering if my eyebrows will stay black like yours when my hair turns white!"

"You have a good thirty years to go before you find out."

Raquel loved her father's voice: few Celts and no Anglo-Saxons spoke Spanish with his perfection. She wished she looked more like her father. Her face was round and she had a pointed chin that prompted persons of any age or sex to cup her chin in their hands. Her mouth was inviting, the lips curved and flexible from forming sounds more subtle than those of the English language. For all its tenderness, it was a mouth that showed self-control. Raquel's lips would express many emotions, but petulance would not be one of them. At the left side of her mouth, where the apple curve of her cheek rounded, she had a flat black mole. The mark was effective against the rich white of her skin.

The genes and chromosomes that assorted themselves to make Raquel O'Riordan might have reached into the grab-bag of Irish and Spanish ancestors and commandeered a characteristic from some forgotten progenitor with cross-eyes or a squint. According to the Mendelians who laid down certain traits as dominant and others as recessive, Raquel's eyes should have been brown, like those of her Spanish mother. Some blue-eyed cavalier must have mixed the strain, making it possible for Raquel to blink at the sunlight of Mexico a pair of dark blue eyes exactly like those of her father. They were eyes that were ready for anything. They could flash with mischief, or just as quickly cloud with compassion. When Raquel's eyes smiled, they were tender; the beholder felt as though he had just peeped into Heaven. Young men staggered away with their hands over their hearts – and old men cursed the date on their baptismal certificates.

Patrick O'Riordan looked at his watch. "With any luck at all, we should sleep in the United States tonight. We must get through the Immigration Office and be ferried across to the Texas side before dark."

"A bath won't hurt any of us," the governess said.

"Man's greatest invention – the bathtub," O'Riordan agreed. "I hope they have them in Brownsville in this year of Our Lord nineteen hundred!"

"Surely at an American hotel . . . " Raquel said. "But if you want to be clean, even a bowl of water will do."

O'Riordan smiled at his daughter.

"That's one of the things I like about you. You should be the most spoiled girl in all Mexico. Thank God, you're natural and down to earth. I hope you will always be entirely honest with yourself – and everyone else. Anyway, that's my prayer for you. Earn everything you get! And when I'm gone on, Soledad will see that you never lose your common sense."

Raquel's face was grave. She knew she could not have her father forever, but she hated to hear the thought put into words. Her father leaned forward and traced the arc of Raquel's eyebrows with his forefingers.

"You're a good girl. And with so little curiosity, for all you are so feminine! You haven't asked me why we are making this trip to the Republic of the North."

"You don't like any of those young men who make their horses prance and rear in front of the house in Durango," Raquel said.

At the mention of suitors, Soledad emitted a sound compounded of contempt and disgust.

"They are a sorry lot," O'Riordan agreed. "I can never convince myself that those noble descendants of Don Quixote and Don Juan are not as much in love with the O'Riordan mines as they are with my daughter."

Eighteen years of stewardship entitled Soledad to voice her opinion.

"If she were pockmarked and undowered, the caterwauling under the windows at night would be less."

O'Riordan laughed for a long time. At last he wiped his eyes. "For a dragon of an old maid, you certainly know a lot about men!"

"I have my five senses and one extra one that tells me things through the pores of my skin."

Raquel looked at Soledad as though seeing her for the first time. She could not imagine any woman disliking men. Raquel had met many men, among them only a few that she could not like, or at least tolerate. She hoped that somewhere in the world there would be one like her father: worldly, distinguished, *simpático*. One like that she wanted for a husband. But even those others could be of some use. She was used to men and liked to be with them. They were entertaining.

Since the death of his wife sixteen years before, it had been O'Riordan's custom to have his baby daughter brought in to preside over his table. By the time Raquel was twelve, mothers in Durango, full of ambition, were pulling the hair and pinching the ears of daughters who could not or would not develop social graces. The mothers failed to comprehend that Raquel's grace and courtesy were not the product of many rules and social exercises: her charm and tact were the flowering of a kind heart and a desire to please.

'There will never be another exactly like my father,' Raquel thought. 'Charming, amusing, and understanding . . . we are so close! Close as father and son are supposed to be, but seldom are.' As she looked at her father, she knew she had hit upon the reason for their closeness:

"There is nothing in the world that I couldn't talk over with you, Father."

While the carriage was rolling along the Mexican road, a Viennese doctor in his forty-fourth year was making himself famous coining names and phrases to explain the almost sexual closeness that exists between some fathers and daughters. Raquel did not know the words psychiatry and psychoanalysis, but she would not have been startled or shocked by the doctor's reasoning: she knew how thoroughbreds were made. She admitted quite simply to herself that her husband-to-be would have a high mark to shoot at.

O'Riordan answered her at last.

"That's the finest compliment a man ever had. I think women are mentally the equals of men . . . many of them their superiors. That idea isn't commonly held in this generation, especially among Latin-American men. I've ignored the conventional idea of what is fitting and proper for a young girl. For that reason I must be very sure of the intelligence and breadth of the man you marry. It won't be easy, since I hope you don't marry off the range. Somehow I can't picture you married to a man of Northern race . . . one of those lads that will send you a note on a silver tray every time he wants to get you in bed!"

"The Lord makes them and He matches them," Soledad said.

"I know the part that destiny plays," O'Riordan said.

"You can go through the woods and still pick the crooked stick! But a variety to choose from never hurt anybody! We shall have a look at these Texans!" He raised the leather flap behind his head and told the driver to stop at the next spot of shade he saw.

Raquel thought lunch might be a long way off if her father wanted to wait for shade. As they came nearer the Rio Grande, the landscape grew dustier and more impoverished. The road shimmered in the noonday heat. Century plants stood here and there sagging under the load of dust on their spears. A peon shuffled by, beating a tired, starveling donkey. Bleached bones were scattered along the roadside and Raquel could see buzzards looping over a recent carcass. No wonder the cattle died in this drouth. On a stunted mesquite tree there was a life-sized effigy of San Ysidro, the saint who was supposed to bring rain. As the carriage approached a village of three adobe huts, Raquel saw dead snakes draped over the fences. A few rods farther along, a man had cut up a viznaga and was squeezing the juice of the cactus into his mouth regardless of the thorns that pierced his hands. Raquel saw her father signal the driver not to stop . . . she knew fleas, mangy dogs, and emaciated children would haunt them during their meal. And it was no use to give them money – there was nothing to buy.

"Unbidden they'll come like flies and fiddlers to a feast," O'Riordan voiced his daughter's thought. She had heard him ponder aloud on the misery of the natives of Mexico many times.

"Thirty-five years in the land of Cuauhtemoc I've had," O'Riordan said. "As a young man in Ireland, I've seen hunger, God knows. But there at least the people know the time of day!"

This land was timeless, Raquel thought. Neither rich nor poor could conceive of time in measured hours. Mañana. Tomorrow. Why should the rich hurry when time was on their side? Why should the poor seek to hasten the days of their desolation? Every hour they lived forged another link in the chain of their indebtedness. Each day and each week tightened the shackles of their peonage, shackles that not even death would remove. Debts were all that the poor had to bequeath to their progeny. The progeny ran to large numbers because the begetting of them was the only pleasure that was free. A timeless land indeed . . . like a giant sleeping off a drug in the sun.

The sound of her father's voice broke off Raquel's brooding.

"You and Soledad will have a chance to practice your English."

"Yes, Father. But have you noticed how anyone who speaks Spanish prefers it to any other language?"

"There must be something in what you say . . . in Brownsville even the North Americans speak it by preference."

"Poetry is more beautiful in it, funny things are funnier . . . and dramatic things! They are hair-raising in Spanish!"

"Then I've wasted a lot of money on those three language professors!" O'Riordan laughed.

"Oh no! I had to know Italian and French to sing. And English is convenient when we travel. But for saying what you mean . . . Spanish is best!" She spoke

English with only a faint Spanish intonation. There was no marked accent. Raquel spoke with the elegance and exactness of pronunciation that is common to those who speak many languages.

Sudden tropic dusk came down as the O'Riordans crossed the Rio Grande.

'Now,' Raquel thought as she peered into the Border night, 'Now it will be different!' This was the dreamed-of American side! With some disappointment Raquel saw that it might as well have been Mexico.

Brownsville sprawled out trustfully hugging the brink of the Rio Grande, clinging closely to the narrow, trickling stream forgetful of the flood to come. Brick and adobe houses bore highwater marks in testimony to what the river could do. The sky was hard and blue; the spires of the Matamoros cathedral were visible against it even at night. They stood like exclamation points emphasizing the violence of the land.

"Here it is just the same," Raquel sighed.

The houses on the Texas side stood flush with the sidewalk like their Mexican counterparts. The heavy solid-shuttered façades gave them a defiant Spanish dignity. The buildings were as stern and uncompromising in appearance as their Mexican owners. Iron bars covered the windows, and on French doors went all the way to the ground. Dwellings and places of business were iron-barred . . . in both cases to keep out thieves — thieves of honor and thieves of merchandise. They left nothing to chance, these men steeped in the tradition that a house with two doors is hard to guard.

As Juanito drove the carriage slowly through the streets looking for the Hotel Garibay, Raquel had time to notice the night sounds and smells. Most pronounced was the smell of wood fires, acrid and pungent. Above the smoke smell rose the high, insistent odor of roasting coffee beans. Through the window of an adobe hut came the spat-spat of water-soaked palms patting out tortillas for the evening meal.

'And always the flowers,' Raquel mused. 'Even the poorest, as with us, has his pots of carnations and reseda!' Over the fences and high walls of the rich drifted the fragrance of jasmine and papaya trees in bloom. Somewhere nearby an orange tree was blossoming. Juanito stopped to ask directions, and the odor of the blossoms came to Raquel with the force of a physical touch.

The streets were lit sparingly. Here and there a lantern hung from a pole at a street corner, but most of the streets were dark.

Raquel began to sense the excitement and hurry that come with the dark. Every living creature seemed to be scurrying to get a roof over its head for the night. She heard the wistful, tentative tuning-up of the street musicians; the preparatory runs on the guitar that promised plaintive melodies. The carriage drew near the center of town, and Raquel saw occasional urchins scudding through the dark streets clutching small packages, unhoped-for treasures of food, last-minute purchases made in the lantern-lit shops.

'This will be squalid by daylight,' she thought, 'but night has a magic veil. Night always promises so much.'

* * *

The resilience of twenty accounted for Raquel's quick recovery from the long jolting ride. Her wide bed had been cool and she was glad to lie on it all day. Now, when the sun dropped, she was getting dressed for the evening. Soledad was arranging her hair.

"It just occurs to me that I have never in all my life combed my own hair," Raquel said.

"Do you want to put me out of a job?" Soledad pinned deep maroon carnations behind Raquel's left ear.

"Listen!" Raquel whispered. Outside in the patio of the hotel, she heard her father's voice alternating with that of a woman. The voice of the woman was one used to issuing commands — and having them obeyed.

"Quick!" Raquel said. "Peep through the blinds and see who she is!"

"I've never seen her before . . . she's a woman of luxury, of certain age. Rich, by the look of her!"

"I wonder who she can be and how she found out we were here?"

Soledad shrugged: "Your father is not exactly small-fry in banking circles. She wants something! Women can smell money the way tree toads smell rain."

"I wonder where she knew Father?"

"Does it matter? Small-town women are great lion-hunters. They think they are conferring the Order of Isabel the Catholic if they so much as offer you a cup of lukewarm chocolate!"

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" Raquel held her breath so that Soledad could finish hooking her écru voile dress. "I'm dying of curiosity! Do I look all right?"

"Passable." By the way Soledad pulled down the corners of her mouth, Raquel knew she looked exceptionally well.

"So this is what you have kept hidden away in Durango!" O'Riordan's visitor said as Raquel came toward her.

"My daughter Raquel," he said, glancing pleasedly at her dress. "This, my dear, is Doña Trinidad Hidalgo. She does me the honor of remembering our meeting at Chapultepec last year."

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, Señora," Raquel said. "You are very kind to call." Raquel was thinking: 'What a type! The world does not owe this one a thing.'

She thought Doña Trinidad must be about fifty. It was hard to tell exactly with the purplish henna she used on her hair and a variety of cosmetics applied with a heavy hand. Her figure was beginning to thicken, but was still impressive. Raquel thought of the machines used for crushing quartz in her father's mines.

"Señorita Hidalgo is put out with me for not letting her know we were coming; she was kind enough to offer us her house," O'Riordan said.

'Señorita!' Raquel thought with amusement. In the strictly technical sense, Trinidad Hidalgo was not an old maid. Raquel could see that she was a woman who ate her cake and had it, too.

"You must be wondering about me," the visitor said. "I am that lowest of God's creations: a money-lender. People who owe me money will tell you that not a single Mexican washerwoman the entire length of the Rio Grande Valley can get her flatirons out of hock on Monday morning without paying me ten per cent on the loan!" Doña Trinidad tossed her head. "The world resents a woman who makes money. You can see how I am wasting away under their opinion of me!"

O'Riordan smiled. "You don't spend much time in Brownsville, do you, Señorita?"

"Two or three weeks twice a year to go over the books, and I'm off again! I know all the capitals of the world, but Washington is my favorite. I often wonder what atrocity one would have to commit to be ostracized by political society!"

Raquel began to understand why Doña Trinidad would be at home in such a place. Her blunt tongue and eagle eye would spare no one.

'I am glad I took pains with my appearance,' she thought. 'Otherwise I would be squirming under her inspection. At any moment she is going to ask me to open my mouth like a horse to see if I have all my teeth.'

Trinidad Hidalgo did seem to be appraising Raquel's body with the frankness of the auction-block:

"She's all woman, Don Patricio, even if she is so tiny! Just the right amount of everything. I feel sorry for you when the young men find out that she is here! They'll make the nights hideous with their groaning serenades."

She turned to Raquel: "Take my advice and get interested in some sound business enterprise . . . a woman has to look after her capital!"

O'Riordan smiled. "I'll attend to that for a while, Señorita! And when she marries, her husband will relieve her of all that arithemetic!"

"And her money!" Doña Trinidad laughed. "But that's none of my business. I came to invite you to a dance at my house Sunday. The gentry want to pay their respects."

"You are going to a great deal of bother on our account, Señorita. But we shall be happy to come," O'Riordan said.

"I understand you sing like a professional," Trinidad Hidalgo addressed Raquel. "Among the cluster of damn fools I support is a battered maestro, a former conductor of opera in Guatemala. He will accompany you not too badly if you will sing."

"Gladly, Señorita," Raquel said.

"I like this one!" Trinidad Hidalgo hugged Raquel, and gave her the crooked smile that had been the undoing of more than one good man. "She doesn't make herself be coaxed!"

"And she takes her whiskey neat, like *buena gente!*" O'Riordan said, coming forward with the tray he had taken from a servant at the door.

"To good people!" Señorita Hidalgo lifted her glass. "There are too few of them." Raquel watched the woman's black eyes soften as she looked up at O'Riordan. "You left Mexico City in full flight that night," she said to him.

Raquel tucked in the corners of her mouth and walked over to examine the flowers in one of the vases. Her father cleared his throat and said nothing.

"Señorita," Raquel said, "will you please excuse me? We brought only one maid and there is a great deal of unpacking to do. I shall scarcely sleep for thinking of your party Sunday!"

Raquel had to get away. She would disgrace herself if she had to endure the spectacle of this gallant and somehow pitiable woman making up to her father.

In the bedroom she dragged Soledad to a remote corner.

"Did you hear?" she whispered.

"I saw how she looked at him!"

"She is smitten with Father."

"That one is smitten with anything that wears its pants on the outside."

"But she's fun! I am so excited over the ball. The cream of society will be there."

"If that harridan gives it, there will be nothing but men there!"

"What's a ball without men, Cholly?"

"There won't be a dress suit left on the racks of the rental shop that night."

"No, Cholly. Not scarecrows! Aristocratic, rich men."

Soledad made a disgusted face.

"Men who have been rich, men who are going some day to be rich, and principally men who are hoping to get rich will be there! But rich single ones . . . there just aren't any! They're after your money."

Raquel spread her arms out and waltzed about the room singing her favorite *Lucia* aria. Her eyes were full of dreams.

"At last I am thine! At last thou are mine!" Soledad broke in. "Very pretty sentiment! But remember how the fox snapped up the cheese when Madame Crow opened her beak to show off her beautiful voice."

"Don't put on black, Cholly!"

"I'm not. I just want you to be careful of this pack of coyotes . . . don't say 'yes' to anything. Stay close to your father and don't go into empty rooms . . . not even by yourself. They are capable of any outrage, men are!"

Raquel's eyes twinkled.

"Didn't you ever see one you wanted to marry, Cholly?"

"And leave you loose in the world with that heart? Besides, I know when I'm well off. A good job, a good home . . . no man to answer to, except of course your father. You are full of the daydreams of twenty. For you, *mi alma,* I wish they could come true!"

"They will, Cholly, I know it!"

"Travel, sightseeing, music! Fashion, entertainment, society! Right now you have everything. But when you put on the yoke, even with the best of them, comes the housegown and the rocking chair. After the first baby, another one every ten months until you are used up. You'll look at your trousseau gowns and wonder that you could ever fasten them! You won't feel like practicing your music, and, anyway, His Lordship is taking his siesta. You'll stop reading books and sink to magazines. After that, you won't even read the newspapers. You won't write to your friends because there will be nothing to tell . . . they don't care about the baby's ringworm! In two years you'll be waiting for me to come home from the shopping with the latest back-stairs gossip. That, my darling, is marriage in our world!"

Raquel sat down sadly.

"Don't frighten me, Cholly. I want love . . . I want it more than anything in the world. It's every woman's destiny to marry and have babies . . . lots of babies. Don't you love babies, Cholly?"

"Child," Soledad said gently, "My father was a day laborer in your father's mines. My mother bore thirteen children before she was thirty. Three of us survived."

"I know, Cholly. The poor have no chance . . ."

"Rich or poor, it's no different for either in our way of life. I blame it all on the men. Even if they don't want a pack of brats, they have to keep right on to impress their companions at the club! 'What's the matter, *Compadre*? No baby this spring?' Each one has to prove that he is still very much of a man!"

Raquel had to laugh in spite of herself, thinking of the young man who married Lolita Ochoa and threatened monthly to take his life because they were married for two years before an heir was indisputably on the way.

"That depends on the man. Take my father . . ."

" 'Take my father,' she says! The Lord outdid himself when He made your father; it isn't likely that even

He could produce another such! Except for him, they are all alike. Look at Don Jorge Caseres, a meek, quiet professor. A decent man, you'd think. And his wife, Amadita, at the age of thirty-two: sixteen living children and one grandchild! Don't tell me it's natural – it's woman's destiny! It's all wrong and I don't like it. A few children, maybe, well-brought-up, and a mother strong enough to enjoy them! But one after another like eggs inside of a hen . . . God forbid!"

Raquel looked at her nurse with wide eyes.

"I am trying to make you understand," Soledad said, "that this will be your life with any Latin-American you marry – rich or poor, ignorant or educated. Stay free and wonderful like you are: you have everything!"

"Why doesn't my father warn me if marriage is so terrible? We talk about sexual relations and all the realities."

Soledad shrugged. "Men, even the best of them, are like monkeys in front of a mirror. They want to see their own image reproduced . . . in their grandchildren."

"That's understandable. Someone has to carry on the line and inherit the estate. I think it will be lovely to have babies. I wants lots of boy babies, they're so entire! So complete. Girl babies look unfinished, somehow."

Soledad looked at Raquel lost in her dream of rosy flesh.

"I'll give you sulphur and cream of tartar in the morning."

That subtle shade of pink suits you," Patrick O'Riordan said to Raquel as she turned slowly in front of him.

Raquel stuck out her foot to show her father the slippers that had been made from the same heavy satin as the dress.

"Remember how you shocked the dressmaker when you told her this satin was the color of a nymph's bottom?"

The garnet necklace that lay snugly at Raquel's throat matched her earrings fashioned in the form of small tassels. She wore a wide garnet bracelet on each wrist.

"Come along," her father said. "Juanito is waiting."

"Please loosen your hair a little, Cholly. It's so tight that it pulls your eyebrows up at the corners." She could find no fault with Soledad's rich black taffeta dress.

The O'Riordans spoke little on the way to Doña Trinidad Hidalgo's house.

"Brownsville has no intention of missing anything!" O'Riordan remarked as Juanito waited his turn to drive up to the carriage entrance.

"I imagine she does this sort of thing as a gesture of contempt," Raquel said.

O'Riordan laughed. "Can't you just hear her saying to them: 'Eat and drink hearty! You've all paid for it!' "

Doña Trinidad stood at the wide door of her rambling tropical house. Her face was more bedizened than usual and she wore a towering black aigrette. Her dress was of wide-meshed black net heavily encrusted with black velvet polka dots. The lining of the gown was glittering yellow satin.

"That dress reminds me of those black nets they put over the horses that draw the hearses in expensive funerals," Soledad muttered. "She's complete even to the plume."

Doña Trinidad welcomed them, smiling.

"I don't see how any human being could look prettier! Leave your things in my bedroom." She pointed to a room across the patio where Raquel saw a number of women and their maids. "And you, my friend," she took O'Riordan's arm, "come with me to the buffet for some brandy before you run the gauntlet."

The room Raquel crossed was in the Regency period. Rich black and gold was effective against the dull white walls and the faded blue-green draperies. Arches and doorways were festooned with garlands of Spanish moss interlaced with blue and mauve air orchids. Potted camellias, soft rose and cherry red, stood around the edge of the dance floor. Raquel saw an ebony grand piano at one end of the room. On a platform at the other end, six musicians were playing stringed instruments.

"Get yourself a comfortable chair where you can see everything," she said to Soledad as they came out of the bedroom.

Raquel crossed the patio and stood in the door of the drawing room waiting for her father. Her father left the group that surrounded Doña Trinidad and escorted her across the room.

The presentations were long and formal. Raquel observed that most of the women were dowagers or old maids. A few young girls were present, but they were shy and suspicious. The thumbnail sketches furnished under her breath by Trinidad Hidalgo kept Raquel with a rigidly held diaphragm lest she burst out laughing in the faces of the unconscious subjects. There seemed to be a preponderance of unattached males, but Raquel was sure they were not bachelors. All the young married women must be like the women of the same age in Durango; at home in interesting conditions.

Most of the older men were well-groomed; a few of them were distinguished-looking. The young fathers of families were sleek and cautious. They carefully refrained from shaking hands. They were almost afraid to smile, Raquel thought, because of the rows of sallow-faced old maids lined up along the walls. There would be among them at least one cousin or aunt of the little wife at home.

'Where are the dashing young men?' Raquel thought wistfully. The first man presented to her answered to the name of Ildefonso Echeverria y Zárate. He had a severe acne of long standing and clammy palms which he kept rubbing up and down the satin stripes of his evening trousers.

The second name on Raquel's card was Brewster Bradford. Señor Bradford's appearance startled Raquel. His Indian mother had willed him her disposition and her skin, the hue of a mahogany log. His Yankee father's gray-green eyes looked out of Bradford's swart face as through a mask. Huldah and Patience Bradford, his sisters, tall, spare old maids with sorrel hair and green eyes, sat defiantly along the wall – Mexican to the very core. They were pitiable in ball gowns of pale-blue and pale-pink China silk. Middle-aged women dressed youthfully, Raquel thought, in a protest against the cruelty of life.

'Are their emotions hybrid too?' Raquel wondered. Then she smiled, remembering that her own blood was mixed. 'But mine is a peaceful mixture because the Irish and Spanish temperaments are similar.'

Raquel opened the dancing with her father. Her card was quite full and most of her partners talked little, if at all. The loquacious one was a miniature dandy called Teófilo Barragán.

"You can understand, Señorita, how a man of my culture and education is starved for companionship in such a desert! Not one of these heathenish females knows the Schottische!"

Raquel answered him with a smile.

"In Brownsville," he continued, "the Latin-Americans outnumber the North Americans about ten to one, maybe more. The town is divided into rigid castes: first the high-born Latin-American families, wealthy or not. In this cattleman's country, blood still counts for something. Next come the *encartados,* half Spanish and half Anglo-Saxon. Young adventurers from Britain were greatly taken by the beautiful Mexican and Spanish girls. Evil tongues attribute much of the allure of these young women to the tidy fortunes they brought with them!"

Whatever the reason for the marriages, Raquel could see, as her partner rolled off ancient Scottish and Irish names, that the alliances had started some of the most distinguished family lines in the Southwest.

The tireless Teófilo went on: "The French have not been idle either, Señorita!"

Raquel nodded. "And the quiet, unflagging strength of the Mexican blood that crept in has conquered all those other bloods. No matter what the descent of these people, they have taken on the color of their surroundings! In their lives and thoughts, they are almost entirely Mexican."

"I myself," Teófilo continued, "am related to the finest blood in Europe: Bettencourt, Ytúrria, Urrútia, and Iturbide!"

Raquel wished that the music would stop and put an end to his peroration. His lack of height annoyed her. Because she was so tiny, Raquel rarely had to dance with a man shorter than herself and it annoyed her above all things.

"Gringos try to flatter us, Señorita, by calling us Spanish. All of us born in Texas or Mexico refer to ourselves proudly as Mexicans, whether of pure Spanish blood or mixed with Indian. I got off a good one last week by asking my Yankee vis-à-vis whether a native of the Thirteen Original Colonies would be flattered to be called English merely because he spoke the English language!"

With relief Raquel saw her father coming across the dance floor to claim her. The dance was ruined for her by the chatter of the earnest mannikin.

'And how hatefully unfair women are! Every one of us!' she thought. " 'If he had been six inches taller, I might have appreciated his talk which is essentially intelligent.' "

"Doña Trinidad wants you to rest a little," O'Riordan said. "She would like you to sing soon."

Raquel sat down beside him on a small sofa. She noticed a doleful man with an extremely high collar hanging around in the background.

"Unless I am much mistaken, that is the relic who is to accompany me."

Within a few minutes, Doña Trinidad came up and brought the maestro with her.

"Tell him what you'll sing," she commanded.

"The *Lucia?*" Raquel suggested.

The man raised his supple, waxen hands in the air, playing six chords on an imaginary piano:

"*Ardon gli incensi?*"

Raquel nodded, incredulous.

"Do you want me to play the thirds in the cadenza with you?"

"Since there is no flute . . ." Raquel said.

The sad man nodded and backed away.

Raquel turned to her father and shrugged.

"He knows what he's doing!" O'Riordan said.

Raquel was soon to find out that her father was right. She felt none of the customary elation that took place when she stood in the bend of the piano. The audience was made up of dull provincials. They were not clever at concealing their distrust of her and she knew they were critical as only ignorant country-folk can be critical. Singing was a delight in itself, but when there were handsome men present, their eyes dilating and their color changing under the spell of her music, Raquel outdid herself.

'Tonight,' she thought sadly, 'I shall just be singing the notes.'

At the crisp, assured sound of the chords that were her introduction, Raquel's blood leaped. She was too well schooled not to respond to a perfect accompaniment. She turned for the briefest instant and smiled at the maestro.

Her scale from the opening B flat to E flat was like a crystal chime. The E flat, usually so dull and unmusical in the soprano voice, throbbed like a bell – a bell that throbbed in the heart of the listener. From then on, Raquel was the demented Scotswoman watching the nuptial tapers burn. Once she glanced at the maestro. His eyes were closed.

Just before the beginning of the poignant theme, Raquel became aware of a tall form dimly outlined against the dark of the patio. She was conscious, not only of a form, but of a presence. The thrill of a secret listener came over her . . . often when she was practicing at home she would hear footsteps on the brick banquette outside the house. She would hear the footsteps slow down as they drew near the sound of her voice. The footsteps would slow down and stop. Always Raquel felt a little thrill at the tribute from an unknown. She sang more beautifully than before, and when she came to the end of the song, she always paused for a moment to listen to the footsteps resuming their march. Convention forbade applause, but Raquel knew in her heart that it was there. She always wondered what the listener looked like, and knew that he was almost certain to be wondering if the singer was as lovely as the song.

Before she realized what she was doing, Raquel found herself singing to the presence in the patio. When the applause crashed through her trance, she did not need her father to tell her that she had never sung so well.

People crowded around her — even the dubious, hard-eyed women. The maestro kept in the background and his eyes filled up when Raquel offered her hand and thanked him.

"Once, Señorita," he murmured, "once in a lifetime comes a privilege like this."

"It's enough to make one believe in the Virgin Birth, the sound of that voice!" Doña Trinidad blasphemed loudly into a point de Venise handkerchief.

Raquel looked out into the dark patio, wondering about the presence she had felt. He was no longer there. She searched the faces crowding about her for a new one. She found no tall form nor new face among them.

Doña Trinidad came up and announced that the next dance was the supper waltz.

Before the waltz began, Raquel stepped out a door that gave on the patio. Her head throbbed as it always did after a long, intense aria. The room was close and the air overburdened. Fumes from the lamps and candles made her head ache. The patio was only a little cooler than the room, and Raquel moved slowly over the tiles until she was out in the garden.

The Gulf breeze blew freely, rustling the leaves of the jasmine hedge. She filled her lungs several times with the cool, scented air. The Queen of the Night was blooming near-by and Raquel was conscious of the plant's heady, disturbing fragrance.

'What good is it?' she thought. 'So much beauty – and all of it useless unless it is shared. These murmurs and scents were made to awaken love . . . and there is no one for me to love!'

She whirled at the creak of soft leather. She thought it must be her partner coming to claim her for the waltz. The tall figure standing still as marble in front of her was not her partner. Her partner would have spoken and offered his arm. This grave-faced man uttered no sound, but stared at her face as though starved for the sight of her. He looked long and unflinchingly. Raquel had the feeling that the meeting had been brought about by the magnetism of his desire . . . he stood in the dark and willed her to come closer.

Raquel looked back into his eyes and knew her destiny. Here was emotion equal to her own.

'If he speaks to me,' she thought, 'I shall be in his arms in less than a second.'

She stood quietly waiting, but he made no move. After a long minute, he turned away abruptly and walked around the side of the house. Raquel was trembling; she felt as though a steel spring had whirred suddenly inside of her.

"Niña!" Soledad's voice brought her back to the world. "I was anxious about you."

Raquel took her hand and walked back to the ballroom like a sleepwalker.

"Your hand is cold! Did something frighten you?"

The girl shook her head and smiled mechanically at her partner who waited by the door. She scarcely knew with whom she danced. Before she was halfway around the floor, she saw the man standing by the orchestra, aloof and inimical. That figure, straight and taut in austere evening garb, would be before her even when she closed her eyes. She had an impression of black, passionate eyes searching for something they had never found and despaired of ever finding. His bronzed weatherbeaten face was impassive and controlled. When the demanding eyes met hers, Raquel knew that love with this man would be an agonizing thing. There would be no lightness nor gaiety. In his need to satisfy his nameless hunger, he would crush and bruise what he loved.

Raquel knew the reason when she saw the stern lines about what had once been a tender mouth.

'There is only one thing that gives a mouth that braced look,' she thought. 'And that is to love someone who does not love you back.'

She kept turning her head to look at him as she was guided about the floor by her partner. Suddenly she felt old – she knew her face was white, drained by the power of her emotion. 'Why,' she thought miserably, 'why must love and suffering be inseparable?'

Raquel almost wished that the music would not stop. She wondered how she could control her trembling knees and walk across the floor with dignity and serenity. She was torn between the desire to avoid suffering and pain and the longing to have this man touch her hand and say words to her. She wanted to put her mouth against his stern, controlled lips and melt them with her tenderness. Not for one instant did she doubt that this man, whose name she did not even know, returned her love.

'He will make me suffer, but he will make me live.'

* * *

RAQUEL rejoined her father at the end of the waltz. She could feel his eyes searching her face, but she would not look up. Doctor Cueto, her supper partner, chatted with O'Riordan. They broke off as Trinidad Hidalgo approached the group. Raquel knew without looking who was at Doña Trinidad's side.

"Señorita O'Riordan, may I present Fausto Hidalgo? Señor O'Riordan, my nephew. You know Doctor Cueto." Trinidad's voice was cold and her eyes glinted.

Fausto Hidalgo bowed slightly to the men without seeming to take his eyes off Raquel's face.

"Your renown must have traveled rapidly, my dear," Trinidad said to Raquel. "Fausto rarely leaves his other diversions to attend a function to which he was not invited."

Her nephew's smile was brief as the flash of a knife-blade.

"Does it surprise you that I use a method you yourself find so successful?" Fausto's voice did not disappoint Raquel; it was low and intense.

"I hope you came in time to hear the Señorita sing!" Doctor Cueto said.

"I did. Unfortunately, I did not get here in time to ask for the pleasure of her company at supper."

"Doctor Cueto is taking Raquel in," Trinidad said.

"Isn't that fairly obvious, Tía?" Fausto turned to O'Riordan. "May I call on you, sir?"

O'Riordan bowed.

"Thank you. Until then, sir. Good night, Señorita."

Raquel did not mean to put her hand out, but somehow she found her hand pressed in a hard, tingling grip. It was no customary polite Latin-American salute of drawing one palm limply and quickly across another: she knew that her father, Doña Trinidad, and Doctor Cueto interpreted the handclasp correctly.

"To you, *mi Tía,* many thanks!" And Fausto Hidalgo was gone.

'What can have happened to him?' Raquel thought. 'He cannot be over forty, and what can have occurred in that length of time to make him grow that coat of mail he wears around him?' She answered her partner automatically, her mind still dwelling on Fausto. She did not know what she ate. The only time she gave attention to what was being said was when she thought Fausto's name was to be mentioned. The orchestra began to play and Raquel was claimed by a man whose name she could not remember. It was too much trouble to look at her dance card and find out.

Her partner whirled her diligently in the waltz, trying to imbue her with the rhythm.

'What a broomstick he must think the O'Riordan girl is,' she thought. 'I have no desire to please him or anyone else. All of a sudden I feel as though I were sitting in an empty theater after the play was over and the audience had gone home.' She found it difficult to concentrate on what was being said to her. "May I call on you, Señor?" rang in her ears. Every minute away from Fausto Hidalgo was a maddening waste. The sound of his voice and the pressure of his hand were all that she had left of him. She wanted to go home and shut herself up with her dreams.

The hours seemed to pass with the slow agony of running steps in a nightmare. Finally Raquel heard the musicians playing "La Golondrina"; she recovered sufficient poise to stand beside her father and Trinidad Hidalgo to say good night to the guests. She knew that the sharp, intuitive Bronsvileños had missed no shade of color in her face or in the sound of Fausto's voice when he spoke to her.

'They came for bread and circuses,' she thought. Doña Trinidad's bread had been lavish, and Raquel tried to deprive them of the circus. She made herself gracious to Teófilo Barragán and to Brewster Bradford when they planned entertainment in her honor. Though she smiled serenely and impersonally, Raquel knew that she was not deceiving any of the spectators. They had a flair for other people's business.

When the house was emptied of guests, Trinidad insisted that Raquel drink a glass of wine while she and O'Riordan had a nightcap.

'Now she is going to tell me,' Raquel thought. She prepared herself to hear that Fausto was married.

"You were a tremendous success." Trinidad's voice, even after a long fatiguing evening, was still a formidable trumpet. "They will have something to talk about for the next ten years."

Raquel smiled. She was too weary to laugh.

"This one is going to drop dead at her own feet if

I don't take her home," O'Riordan said. "Tomorrow we'll talk."

Soledad brought Raquel's wrap and helped her into the carriage. She tried to relax, but was too tired. Her father talked very little. Because he did not mention him, Raquel knew he was thinking of Fausto Hidalgo.

"Good night, darling," he said as he left her at her room. "Tomorrow we'll talk."

It seemed to Raquel that tomorrow was to hold a great deal of talk. When was Fausto going to talk – and what would he say to her? She could not force herself to stop thinking of this man whom she scarcely knew. She put her hand under her cheek and pretended it was Fausto's hand. Would her thoughts ever be free of this man? He had captured her imagination. He would come to her with every new sight, on every scented breeze, and in every pleasing sound. Each page she might read would bring him to her afresh. The blue nights and little early mornings would recall him to her. She would wonder for the rest of her life, 'where is he now? What is he doing? Is he thinking of me?' Her honesty allowed a little bitter mist to settle on the surface of her consciousness . . . a small gray fog of presentiment. 'In our relationship there will be infinite bitterness. If I get him, there will be bitterness – and if I don't, my life will be nothing but misery. Nothing can ever be whole for me again,' she thought. 'Everything that happens to me from now on will be colored by the effect it has on him. Everything I see will be seen through his eyes.' Tears of resentment stung her. 'What right has he – this man whom I do not know in any sense – to come in and dominate my life?'

Rebellion died as quickly as it had risen. 'He did not ask for an open city. . . I laid down my arms voluntarily. Even if I never see him again, I owe him a great deal. He made me come to life. Even suffering will have a meaning.'

Relief came in tears. Once she was freed from the effort of holding them back, the tears eased Raquel and let her think.

'What a fool I am! In our world, would Fausto dare to come to Father if he were married?'

And she slept.

A FAINT PRAIRIE BREEZE stirred the curtains at Raquel's window. The girl lay quietly and pulled the sheet up closer around her throat. She had been awake for some time watching the daylight come in a soft pink flush. In the great antique mirror across the room she saw herself reflected wanly.

'Perhaps it is the old glass,' she thought, turning her head away from what she saw. Her heart beat fast and occasionally skipped a beat.

Outside the soothing swish of the sprinkling cart on the dusty street made her relax a little. Somewhere at the back of the hotel the snarl of a coffee grinder reminded her that the morning coffee would soon be along.

'Today is yesterday's tomorrow! What will it bring? Disillusion? The disenchantment that comes when the enthusiasms of the night are viewed in the cruel light of noonday?' Raquel touched her right hand gently. It seemed to her that it still tingled from Fausto's clasp.

'Perhaps I did dream it,' she thought. 'There was madness in Doña Trinidad's wine. I was drunk with my own song and the scent of the jasmine hedge! The soft light of the patio only made him seem irresistible!'

Raquel forced herself to remember a blond Austrian youth she had seen at a dance in Mexico. When he spoke to her the fluting treble of his voice had sent her hurrying into the garden to hide her laughter.

'Men fall in love through their eyes, but women are won or lost by what they hear.' She trembled slightly – the warm, deep ring of Fausto's voice was in her ears even now. 'Thank God, he cannot see me this minute – with this face like a Carnival mask.'

Soledad came in with a steaming pot of black coffee. Raquel drank a cup gratefully.

"Another one," Soledad insisted. "You need it this morning." Raquel finished the coffee while Soledad took the hot water from a boy at the door and began to prepare Raquel's bath.

Raquel pushed back the cover and fished for her slippers. With one upward sweep she removed her nightgown and stood naked in the soft morning sunlight. She turned so that she could see her body in profile in the glass: her breasts were round and high and her hips small and tight like a boy's.

"You don't have to worry!" Soledad said. "There is nothing like turbulent love to conserve the line. Get into the tub before you take your death!"

Raquel stood up at last for Soledad to rinse her. She caught her breath sharply as the cold well water went over her chest and shoulders. Soledad rubbed the girl's body vigorously with a towel.

"Back into bed and do what I tell you – we can't have that pale face! A woman's looks are her only armor." Raquel put her feet up on the pillows piled at the foot of the bed. Soledad removed the pillow from under the girl's head and made her lie still while she put away the bath things and got out fresh clothing.

'How good she is to me,' Raquel thought. 'She knows how I feel and is trying to bolster me up for what is to come. It will take courage to face disappointment, but it will take more to face the reality, if he turns out to be real!'

"Your father is waiting breakfast for you," Soledad said. When she finished dressing her, she put both hands on Raquel's shoulders and spoke to her in the mirror:

"Don't go in looking like a conquered country."

O'Riordan was grave and Raquel saw that he had slept little.

"The dance was tiring," he said.

Raquel nodded. They ate a light omelet and crusty Mexican bread. She had to force down the first few bites, but after that ate hungrily. When they finished, O'Riordan lit a cigar. The waiter took away the table and Raquel stretched out in a wicker chair.

"I have never seen you moved as you were last night," her father said.

"It was the first time for me."

"We know absolutely nothing about the man except that he is Trinidad Hidalgo's nephew."

"Nothing. Not even whether he is married or single."

"He's single! You are attracted to each other like a magnet and a pin."

Raquel said nothing.

"So far as I know, there is none of the coquette in you." O'Riordan looked at his daughter for a long time.

"There's a kind of snobbery in me that makes me demand the best for you always."

Soledad appeared in the door of the patio.

"A gentleman," she said.

Raquel's heart stopped for a moment and she felt white. She turned her head toward the door as her father rose. Beyond him she taw a tall figure in the dim hall. Panic took hold of her: 'What shall I do if he really is the way I think he is?' When her father stepped aside, Raquel saw with disappointment that the man was not Fausto Hidalgo.

"Don Miguel Fernandez, daughter."

Raquel bowed.

"Excuse the hour, Señorita. We bankers cannot afford to celebrate Saint Monday's. On the Border we find it sensible to take advantage of the cool mornings."

Señor Fernandez opened a small portfolio.

"I think you will find all the banking in order."

"I am eager to go over these papers with you," O'Riordan said and offered him a cigar. He turned to Raquel: "I'll be busy until five. Juanito will take you and Soledad for a drive. Come back in time for a nap – we may have callers this evening."

Raquel went to her bedroom to get her things. Soledad was ironing a cream-colored organdy dress trimmed with row upon row of narrow black velvet ribbon.

"The only thing I dislike about that dress is the amount of work it costs you," Raquel said. "Are you nearly finished? We are going for a ride."

Soledad nodded. "You'll need this dress before the day is over."

Raquel sighed and walked to the window. It was covered with heavy iron bars and gave on a small garden path that led to the entrance of the hotel.

"Look, Cholly! Look what's here!" She untied a cluster of red carnations from the grating. The flowers were fresh and pungent. "But I can tell you before I look at the note that they are not from him! Can you picture him coming through the streets with a handful of flowers?"

Soledad twisted her lips. "No more than I can see him playing the bear at your window like a lovesick muleteer."

"Bah! This is something from the pen of Teófilo Barragán." Raquel tore the note to bits. "Hurry up . . . I'm stifling. I'll wear that dress tomorrow."

Sly gray dust crept down and gave the town a misleading pallor.

'The dust is like ashes,' Raquel thought. 'The town has an ambiguous kind of repose.' The carriage moved slowly through the streets. Brownsville looked like an Old-World town dozing in the sun. 'But here, as at home,' Raquel thought, 'the contrast between rich and poor is too great. I had hoped to see some of the democratic life I had read of . . . happy, thrifty people, each content with his own trade. No vast riches, and no abject poverty. But here, too, there is more than meets the eye. The rich could not become so rich without vice, and the poor could not be so dismally poor without injustice. Is it different anywhere in the world?'

The sight of the magnificent houses and lush gardens started Raquel thinking of Fausto Hidalgo again. In which one of them had he been born? Did one of these white palaces belong to him? Had he escorted the women of his family up the steps of this old and serene cathedral? Did he come there himself? How could she ever know all that she wanted to know of him?

Juanito slowed the horses to a walk in front of the church.

"I want to go in," Raquel said. She and Soledad entered and made their devotions. For a long time Raquel sat thinking of what the future would hold for her. She tried to analyze her own religion, not from any sense of doubt or questioning, but from a desire to reinforce any weak spots she might find. For her religion was not simply a matter of church-going. She knew that in her life she would need her belief, need it sorely, and as few human beings had ever needed it for strength:

'For I am headlong: I withhold nothing – and make myself vulnerable. Sometimes I wonder how God can ignore my stupidities; but He always gives tomorrow, and tomorrow is a new beginning. My father has given me the philosophers – in no way do they seem to conflict with God. When they conflict at all, it is with man-made rubric, and not with what we believe to be God's word.'

"Come out of here before you take a chill!" Soledad whispered. "For a moment there you looked like your own grandmother! Whatever were you thinking?"

Raquel gestured toward the stream of black-clad women gliding in and out of the cathedral.

"I was thinking that religion is not a matter of convent-trotting or wiping up the floors of churches with the knees."

"In a bad hour you met that man! He's making your teeth harden very fast."

"Don't curse him. I'm not sure that such a person even exists. It seems to me now that I made him up out of whole cloth. If I saw him again, he might appear so different that I should not even recognize him."

Slowly the carriage moved around the plaza. Half-naked urchins were spinning tops against the brick sidewalk. Down the narrow little streets Juanito drove till he came to Fort Brown with its barracks and low adobe walls. The bugle calls of Fort Brown could be confounded with the trumpet calls of the Matamoros *cuartel* on the Mexican side, so close the two towns lay.

The Rio Grande, with the shallow rowboats that ferried people back and forth, was sluggish and yellow. Raquel saw sad-eyed, malarial-looking doctors examining frightened Mexicans who came across to visit relatives or make some small purchase on the American side. She watched old women remove surreptitious coins from their mouths: coins that might have been handled by lepers. The crones would be ferried back at night, clutching avidly tiny striped paper bags of *dulces* to sweeten the nights forsaken by love.

'Love again!' Raquel thought. 'No matter where I turn my eyes or mind, love insinuates itself. Perhaps the answer is: Accept it.'

Juanito took the road back to the center of town. On the main thoroughfare, street vendors did a thriving trade. Men kept watch over pots of boiled roasting ears. Women vendors of tamales crouched by street corners. Sweetmeat sellers stood lackadaisically fanning flies with fly switches made of strips of gaily colored tissue paper. Flies like clusters of wild grapes clung to chunks of candied pumpkin and cactus root. Several ragged children stood with saliva running from the corners of their mouths in front of the vendor of anise-flavored taffy.

"Have you any coppers?" Raquel said to Soledad. She tossed a handful of pennies onto the road. "It must feel something like that to be God," Raquel said. "They never expected to get a stick of that candy by any miracle – and yet, all of a sudden, from nowhere, there is the sticky, delicious *caramelo* in the dirty fist! There is more pleasure in giving pennies to those babies than in giving a stained-glass window to the cathedral . . . I've just found out why."

"Why, Madame Philosopher?"

"Because nobody really wants a stained-glass window!"

Soledad smiled. "It's about time we went home. This is the Court House, and we are not too far from the hotel."

Juanito was listening, for he turned the corner in front of the Court House rather sharply. A closed hack was drawing away from the curb. Juanito waited for it to pull out and Raquel turned her head in time to see a man mount a horse at the sidewalk. At once she knew the set of the shoulders. Her heart choked and her hands felt like ice. She heard Soledad suck in her breath. Another man, already mounted, was beside Fausto. When he straightened up with the reins in his hands, Fausto Hidalgo saw Raquel. The blood surged to his face for a second, and then left him pale. Both men removed their hats and Fausto spurred his horse a step closer to the carriage. In the sunlight, Raquel noticed clearly the chiseled lines of his face: how Spanish he was! That same air of disdain stamped the Conquistadores, his ancestors. Raquel knew that her smile was stiff and empty. Where was the release, the liberation, that was to come with the second sight of him? Where was the disenchantment she had almost hoped for? His manner was flawless . . . in the merciless daylight there was no trace of viciousness about him, only the despairing hunger she had seen in his eyes the first night.

'He does care! He does, or he could not be so moved.' Raquel's blood exulted in her veins. 'He is all I thought he was – and more. I will have him and make him mine until I am part of every cell in his body!'

It seemed an eternity to Raquel before Fausto's voice came to her.

"Señorita, my regards to your father."

Raquel bowed, but did not speak. She signed to Juanito to drive on. There would be time to talk later. She knew what she had to know.

TUESDAY MORNING, Raquel roamed aimlessly around her bedroom. Nothing could hold her attention for more than a few minutes.

"Do some embroidery," Soledad suggested.

"What I would do today would take me all next month to rip out, Cholly." Raquel picked up a copy of *Pepita Jimenez* and tried to read; even Valera's lively lady could not interest her.

Someone knocked at the door. Soledad took the message from a houseboy.

"Your father wants you in the patio. There is company."

Raquel hurried to her dressing table and picked up her handglass. She made sure that her hair was smooth, then rubbed powder on her face with a chamois. Her hand trembled and her mouth felt dry.

O'Riordan was waiting for her at the door leading to the patio.

"Doña Trinidad is lunching with us today."

Raquel groaned inwardly. The waiting began again inside her heart. She leaned forward so that Doña Trinidad could kiss her cheek.

"There was a time when I too could dance all night and not show the effect of it. You look like a flower garden! As for me, you see I resort to the high net collar to hide the wrinkles in my neck . . . wrinkles that are exactly like the folds of a fallen stocking!"

O'Riordan handed Doña Trinidad a glass of gin and vermouth.

A waiter entered bearing a tray high over his head.

"Isn't it odd," Trinidad said as she tucked her napkin carefully over her white linen skirt, "how we love our black bean soup? We of the Border know it daily from our infancy, yet we never tire of it. Away from here, I often long for an honest dish of *sopa de frijol.*"

"Your dance was delightful," O'Riordan said. "It gave us an excellent picture of Border people. They seem to know how to combine the best features of several civilizations."

"That's how it seems," Trinidad said. "If only it were so! They have a veneer of civilization, but it scratches easily. Those you met were on dress parade, wearing company manners – and ideas! The majority of the women are lazy, superstitious, and ignorant. The men, with one or two exceptions, bigoted, avaricious, and lecherous."

O'Riordan smiled. "You dot the *i*'s neatly, Doña Trinidad!"

She shrugged. "I am old. I know them all as well as I know the palm of my hand . . . which leg Fulano limps on, where the shoe pinches Sutano, what slips Mangano made – who is the true father of the child! Not even a confessor could know more. No bug crawls up a wall in this town that I don't know about."

"A lively existence!" O'Riordan said.

"I have seven vices and only one virtue" – Trinidad grinned at Raquel – "I am never bored."

"Nor boresome," Raquel said. Trinidad's crepy eyelids fluttered. 'How little it takes to please her,' Raquel thought. 'I could become very fond of her. She only irritates me because she refuses to talk about the person who interests me most.'

"To get back to my grapevine," Doña Trinidad said. "The day after the dance a bit of conversation was reported to me that might amuse you."

Raquel carefully wiped all expression from her face. Someone must have commented on her attraction to Fausto. No matter what Trinidad Hidalgo might say, she would not let her face betray her this time.

"An old she-captain who heard you sing turned to another randy and asked, apropos of the high E flat at the end of the cadenza, 'What is that note she takes?' To which the first replied: 'If she is Trinidad Hidalgo's protégée, she will take any note that brings eight per cent!' "

Raquel felt annoyed and relieved at the same time. Seldom had she heard her father laugh so heartily.

The waiter brought chilled papayas with limes, cool strawberry guavas, and purple figs each wrapped in a glossy green cone made from fresh orange leaves. The stems of the figs stuck out blackly against the shiny green.

"They are almost too pretty to eat," Raquel said.

Trinidad nodded. "But very necessary with this somewhat energetic Camembert."

'Why doesn't she come to the point?' Raquel wondered. 'Sooner or later, I know we are going to have the inquisition. If she had been a bullfighter, her capework would have been spectacular!'

"My carriage is outside," Doña Trinidad said. "You and your *ama* must take the river drive after lunch. There is scarcely any sun under the big cottonwoods. The air will do you good."

"Thank you, Señorita. If you don't mind, I would rather listen to you and Father for a little while, then go to my room for a nap."

Doña Trinidad shook her head.

"You would be bored. We have many heavy things to discuss."

Raquel wished she were not well-brought-up. 'How satisfying it would be to tell her that since I am sure this heavy talk concerns me, it is most unlikely that I would be bored.'

"The ride will do you good," O'Riordan said.

Raquel looked at her father, but he did not smile.

"Yes, Father."

Doña Trinidad's carriage had fresh seat-covers of shantung silk edged with fringe. The canopy was green and the rubber-tired wheels rolled smoothly along the street paved with mesquite blocks.

"Such an hour for a ride!" Raquel fumed. "Even the cats and dogs are taking their siesta." She was sorry she had bothered to put on the cream organdy dress and her best leghorn shade hat.

"There is no use to keep twisting and turning like that," Soledad said. "Just because you ran into him once, don't think he is foolhardly enough to hang around the main street waiting for you to drive by!"

Raquel sighed and leaned back. The town was gray and dull for many blocks. Then the road turned and small sprawling mesquite groves came into view. Their feathery foliage and yellow threadlike blossoms scented the hot, still air. The perfumed afternoon slackened Raquel's taut nerves like a whiff of some potent anaesthetic.

"It is better than mimosa," she said.

A road-runner crossed the road with a snake in his mouth. From a brushpile a mother quail led her covey of babies to a shimmering cornfield across the road.

"See how they are not afraid," Soledad said.

The team trotted steadily along the edge of the river. Gray moss hung from the trees and purple verbena carpeted the ground. Spanish daggers thrust out their spears to protect the huge clusters of waxen bells that bloomed above them.

Raquel noticed a cottony substance that strewed the ground. It was shed by a grove of large cottonwood trees.

"Let us stop here," Raquel said to the driver. The great trees with their pale twisted trunks fascinated her. The dark, heart-shaped leaves were smooth and fragrant.

"Listen!" she said as a breeze stirred the leaves. "They make a noise exactly like rain. In a dry country, what a good thing the *álamos* are!"

As she spoke, Raquel saw the horses' ears point forward. She heard no sound but the horses stamping to keep off flies. Nevertheless, a tiny chill went over her: someone was looking at her from the brush. 'It is like sitting in a room with the lamps lit and the shutters open,' she thought. One of the horses whinnied. The gray-purple leaves of the *cenizo* parted and Fausto Hidalgo rode out.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"Out riding . . . " Raquel stammered foolishly. She noticed the white line on his forehead when he removed his hat. The rest of his face was dark from sun and wind. He looked different, somehow.

'The clothes,' she thought. In formal clothing he looked like a dry-point etching, cold and a little sinister. In the Mexican buckskin jacket the creamy silver color of a palomino pony, under the soft filtered light of the cottonwoods he looked almost boyish.

"Isn't this my aunt's rig?" he said.

Raquel nodded, not looking away from his face. She wanted to say something brilliant and captivating. She was conscious of Soledad at her side, stiff and silent as a mummy.

'It makes no difference,' she thought. 'I would be even more stupid and tongue-tied if we were alone.'

"Where is your father?" Fausto asked.

"At home with Doña Trinidad."

Fausto smiled. Raquel saw it was not the cruel flash he had given his aunt the night of the dance. This smile was at once mischievous and mournful.

"At home with my aunt . . . taking the hide off me inch by inch."

Raquel said nothing. She thought he looked as though he were made of braided rawhide, stronger than steel cables.

"In her haste to get you out of the way, my aunt did me a great favor," Fausto said.

"Why does she hate you?" Raquel said.

Fausto shrugged. "She could for a variety of reasons. I think she distrusts me because we want the same things. I was on my way to town to dress and call on your father, but my meddlesome aunt has arranged things much better."

"I thought you weren't coming," Raquel said.

"You know better than that." Fausto dismounted. He stood by the carriage, one arm on the back of the seat, his foot resting on the carriage step. He was so close that Raquel could see herself reflected in his eyes. The smell of Florida water and strong Mexican tobacco that came from his person made her dizzy. The surge of her blood made her eyes feel heavy and drowsy. She looked down at her bare arms to see if her flesh was actually reaching out for Fausto, but her hands were decorously folded in her lap.

"I had to think," Fausto said. "I had to think long and hard. Things happen to me, Raquel. Bad things. Part of me is dead and buried with my wife and little son. I have no right to you – you deserve more than just a piece of a man."

Raquel felt the lump dissolving in her heart: she had only a ghost to compete with!

"I will give you many little sons. If you love me . . . "

Fausto put his hand over her mouth.

"Don't expect the wordy romance of a ballad-singer from me, Raquel."

Raquel could not keep her lips from kissing the palm of Fausto's hand. He raised his hand to his own lips.

"Thank you, my darling. You are sweet and warm like a tea rose. I had decided that love was something a man was better off without."

"Cruel things must have happened to make you think that."

"Sooner or later you have to know," Fausto said. "Even now my aunt is relating her version to your father. But I want you to hear it from me . . . and God be my judge if I lie! Pito, unhitch your horses."

The driver got down and obeyed silently. Soledad climbed stiffly from the carriage.

"Where are you going?" Raquel said.

"I am not needed here." The girl searched Soledad's grave face. The *ama* looked back at her for a long time. When she spoke, her voice was resigned: "What can one do against the inevitable?"

Evening primroses were opening their creamy cups among the silver leaves when Raquel leaned over the side of the carriage to take leave of Fausto. He nudged his horse close to the carriage side.

"You are sure you want to face them alone? It will not be easy. They are both clever and worldly."

Raquel held tight to his hand. "Since I know you love me, I can face anything."

Fausto's hand tightened on hers as though he would never let go. He leaned forward and Raquel felt as though she were being lifted bodily into his arms. His voice was hoarse.

"Your father has the right to try to dissuade you if he can. I am giving him that chance. But I am coming for you tomorrow! There is such immediacy in our need of each other . . . it is almost as though we were struggling against time itself!"

"Always our destinies will be at war," Raquel said.

"But the strength of every hour is within the hour . . . I am no coward."

Raquel was not sure whether it was the sun's last rays or a flash of tears that made Fausto's eyes brilliant.

"I am not going to kiss you," he said. She felt the strength of his desire and knew the force of her own. "I am not going to kiss you because I could not stop there."

"I would not want you to," she said.

The carriage started forward with a lurch as the horses bolted in outrage at the sharp lash from Fausto's quirt.

The lamps and candles were lit in the patio of the Hotel Garibay when Raquel and Soledad walked in. Servants scurried through the halls silently. Raquel thought they looked at her anxiously.

Patrick O'Riordan got up from his chair when Raquel appeared in the doorway, but she had the feeling that he had just sat down at the sound of her footsteps in the hall.

Doña Trinidad Hidalgo sat in a high-backed chair, silent as a stone idol. A great silver dish of cigarette stubs smoldered in front of her.

"You are all right?" O'Riordan said tensely. Raquel nodded. "Tell Juanito that my daughter has returned. We won't be needing the carriage." Raquel saw him searching Soledad's face as he gave her the order.

"You are pale," he said to Raquel. "Did you have any trouble?"

"We stopped by the river and Fausto Hidalgo was there."

"I see," her father said quietly. He looked quizzically at Trinidad Hidalgo.

She shrugged faintly.

"Who can dodge lightning?" She took up her sunshade and gloves. "I am going now." She took Raquel's hand. "Forgive me, my dear."

Raquel sat down by the window, tired to the marrow, and watched her father hand Trinidad into her carriage. Their faces were grave and they spoke in monosyllables. 'She did have her say about Fausto!' Raquel thought. 'But I cannot hate her! If she had not sent me away, I could not have heard the truth from Fausto first.'

Her father came into the room.

"Drink a little wine. You look as though every drop of blood had been drained from your veins."

She sipped the wine and felt its comfort. It would be easier to talk now that Trinidad was gone and there was no need to dissimulate.

"I am sorry he went behind my back," O'Riordan said.

"He didn't, Father. If Doña Trinidad had not insisted on sending us for the ride, we should never have run into him. He was on his way here."

"She has been giving me some of his pedigree . . . I have to tell you it isn't good."

"I know."

"How much do you know?"

"All, I believe."

O'Riordan looked at his daughter sharply. "And you are undisturbed?"

"Of course I am disturbed, Father. My serene days are gone forever."

"My child, serenity and security are the mortar that holds the bricks of marriage together! How can you hope to build firmly on a quaking bog?"

"I wish I knew, Father."

O'Riordan walked over to the window and looked into the garden for a long time. Finally he turned to Raquel.

"You were brought up to abhor the idea of the *casa chica.* He has told you of these affairs?"

"He has, Father. The sad part is that there are children from this last woman. He lived with her a long time. He told me he never found love with her, but he did find convenience. Yesterday he brought the thing to an end and settled some property on her; he wanted to come to you with his hands as clean as he could." Raquel looked at her father's white face and her heart sank. 'He is looking at me as though he had never seen me before.'

O'Riordan sat down heavily.

"I know it's the custom of the country . . . it has never shocked me in the least. In fact, it seemed prudent for a young man to keep a clean, faithful girl instead of running risks in the brothels."

"You always said the little house on the side was only harmful if continued after marriage."

O'Riordan looked at his daughter and tried to smile.

"When a man holds these fine philosophical discussions with his daughter, he never really expects them to come home to roost. It all depends on whose ox is in the ditch!"

"I understand Fausto's loneliness, his need — and forgive him."

"You are all heart and no head, my dear. I am trying, not too successfully, to use a little intelligence in the matter. Have you considered that these children of his have some claim on him too? Legitimate or bastard, they will be half-brothers and sisters to your sons and daughters. Can you share him?"

"That's not fair, Father! Any man in Durango, or Paris, or London that I might have married would have had a similar history. The only difference is that they would not have told me, ever. Fausto loves me, and when we have each other, he will not be concerned with anything but making me happy. He has never been loved."

O'Riordan studied Raquel's face for a long time.

"I admire you very much in an impersonal sort of way. I believe that your nature is big enough to triumph over things that would destroy a lesser woman. I don't know why I do . . . you are untried, as yet. I feel the way I would about a fine racing colt that had still to run his first race: by the look of him, I know he will win."

Raquel's heart ached in her breast.

'If he would rant and rave . . . tell me to get my things packed, that we were leaving this place forever, it would be easier!' she thought.

"Marriage," her father said, "even under ideal circumstances is difficult enough. I would like to see you start your race without any handicaps. Can you, with your honesty, tell me that you are not like all the sisters of Cain – jealous? If during a quarrel Fausto stamps out of the house, hurt and angry, can you convince me that you will not suffer from the thought that he has gone back for comfort to the soft, brown Indian girl he found such a convenience?"

Raquel looked into the deep blue eyes so like her own.

"It takes two to quarrel. There will be no quarrels."

"You still haven't answered my question."

"You know that inside I shall always wonder if he is comparing us . . . not just the Indian woman, but his dead wife. I would be a little less than human if I did not resent them."

O'Riordan moved close to his daughter.

"You have so much to offer the man you marry: contact of a quick mind as well as the contact of your lovely body. Your music. Your thoughtful ways for a man's comfort about the house." O'Riordan smiled sadly. "I sound as though I were more than a little in love with you myself . . . and of course I am. Every father is bitterly jealous of the man his daughter marries. It's a horrible sensation. I know you for the kind of woman you are; for what I've brought you up to be. He is going to know you as a wife, as his beloved. But he can only really know you with his soul. Physically he will dominate you — and that's as it should be. But your bodily attraction will blind him to the real you . . . how much spiritual possession he ever gets of you will depend entirely on the size of his own heart and soul."

"He is hungry for companionship. I think I can make him a good wife."

"God damn his soul to hell! Don't ever be humble about yourself, Raquel! The question is: Can he make you a good husband? That's what I'm interested in! It's stupid to harp on the fact that the man had mistresses after his wife's death: but there are other obstacles, terrible ones! His extravagance; his lack of ability in handling his lands; his general flightiness . . . have you considered these things at all?"

"I have been thinking of nothing else. He told me he threw away money and that he was in debt. I have come to the conclusion that it is because he has nothing to live for."

O'Riordan sighed heavily.

"Perhaps you are right. Your instinct may have found depths in the man that the rest of the world never suspected. He's going to make a formal demand, I take it."

"Tomorrow."

* * *

FRIDAY AFTERNOON, Raquel was reading in her bedroom. Soledad sat close by doing drawn-threadwork. Suddenly the girl put her book down.

"Would you wash my hair, Cholly?"

She saw the calculation going on in Soledad's head: how long would it take the water to heat?

"It was washed on Sunday, but my head feels so tight that only a hard scrubbing will do it any good."

While the water heated, Soledad took a silk bag of amole roots from a trunk and grated them on a saucer. When the boy brought the copper pails full of water, she sent him back for an egg and two lemons. Raquel had taken her hair down and Soledad brushed it with a brush made of wiry strips of coco fiber. In the afternoon sun Raquel's hair gleamed like black silk plush. In the hollows of the waves the light was reflected, at times purple and at times green.

"It feels as though it were alive," Soledad said as she spread the mass of hair backward toward the basin.

"Already the rubbing has made my head feel better. I might even go to sleep," Raquel said drowsily.

The pungence of the amole lather was pleasant. Soledad's strong hands massaged well down the back of the girl's neck and she jumped slightly.

"That felt like hitting my funny-bone."

There was a tap at the door. Soledad dried her hands and answered.

"Doña Trinidad wishes you to come to her house at once, if you can. Her carriage is waiting."

"Is she here?"

Soledad shook her head. "The coachman brought the message."

"Ask him to tell her that I am sorry, but my hair is wet and I cannot leave the house."

"That one is always looking for something to stick her bill into," Soledad muttered as she went to deliver the message. When she came back, she rinsed the girl's hair many times with strained lemon juice and cool rainwater, rinsed it until the soft hair squeaked with cleanliness. Then she dried it with thick, warm towels. When the surplus water was removed, she parted Raquel's hair and pushed the deep, soft waves into place with her fingers. The loose hair hung down over a towel draped around Raquel's shoulders. Soledad moved a big chair close to the west window where the afternoon sun could finish the drying. She stood by and softly fanned the waves with a palmleaf fan.

There was another knock at the door.

"What now?" Raquel asked.

"The old one again! She is outside in the patio and insists on seeing you right here in your bedroom."

"Very well. Get me a fresh peignoir and ask her to come in."

Trinidad Hidalgo came in with less than her usual bustle. Raquel thought her face was haggard. She wore a beautifully tailored suit of natural-colored tussore silk. The only trimming was a narrow piping of tomato color, and buttons of carved cinnabar. Two flamingo-colored wings nestled on the side of her fine straw hat.

'From that hat to those bronze kid pumps she proclaims rue de la Paix,' Raquel thought.

"I am sorry to have you find me in such a condition," Raquel smiled. "Especially when you look so trim yourself!"

Trinidad waved an arrogant hand.

"I would trade with you any day! May I smoke?" She rustled around trying to make herself comfortable.

"Of course," Raquel said. She was reminded of a dog chasing its tail around in the grass before settling.

"Will you please bring some sherry, Cholly?" Raquel said. "Then perhaps you had better have a look at the pastry for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Trinidad Hidalgo bit off the word. "Tomorrow your father gives the answer. That is what I must talk to you about. Ever since Wednesday I have been trying not to do this thing! First, because it may make you hate me, and second – because it is really none of my business."

"Whatever this is about, Señorita, at least we are going into it without any illusions."

"You know what it's about."

"I think I do. But since you gave yourself the bother of coming here to see me, I think it is only courteous not to jump at conclusions."

Trinidad stared hard at the girl.

"That's what puzzles me," she said. "How you can be so intelligent and so stupid at the same time!"

Raquel smiled. "Don't you think, Señorita, that we have had enough of feints and delays? Let us come to the point, shall we?"

"I wish I didn't like you! Then I should not feel responsible for what is going to happen to you."

"Thank you. But you don't really need to, Señorita."

"The point, my dear, is that I do! Couldn't you call me Trini? It makes me feel young."

In spite of herself, Raquel was touched. 'I cannot let her begin by softening me up. She is using all her heaviest ammunition to win me . . . and she has plenty of it! She must realize she can't convince me.' She kept perfectly quiet, and after a moment Trinidad continued.

"My motive in renewing my acquaintance with your father was purely, I mean entirely, selfish. It is no secret that I snatch up every crumb of pleasure I can get! I think every bit of happiness men and women can . . ."

Raquel spoke softly. "My father's heart, Doña Trini . . ."

"My dear," the woman interrupted, "I didn't aspire that high!"

Raquel caught her breath. She did not know whether to laugh or to cry. In another instant she felt she would give way to hysteria and do both.

Trinidad's hard voice saved her. "I dropped a pebble in the pool to make a selfish little ring for myself, but the ripples spread out beyond me. Now the ripples have become a whirlpool, and you will be sucked into the vortex. I am in no way trying to stop you from what you must do — I am too old a hand to attempt that.

But I do want to assure myself that all the cards are on the table and that you know every one of the facts in the case."

"Why do you hate Fausto?"

Trinidad lit a cigarette carefully.

"Actually I don't. It goes a long way back. I'm going to tell you something that I've never put into words before. I was devoted to my brother; the woman he married made a fool of him. She herself could not have told you who Fausto's father was. I despise even her memory so much that it colors my feeling for my nephew. . . . I blame his flightiness on her. When he dissipated the money and much of the land my brother worked so hard to save and increase, I could see her giddy face looking out through his eyes, mocking me." She slumped suddenly in her chair. "Isn't it hard to be honest?"

Raquel knew that no answer was expected.

"I don't suppose you were present at the formal call Wednesday?"

Raquel shook her head.

"Wasn't your father surprised that he came alone?"

"He said that apparently Fausto did not cling to the old custom of the committee."

Trinidad nodded slowly. "You see, Raquel, your father is too much a man ever to think that Fausto Hidalgo did not have three friends to his name."

For a moment Raquel felt cold . . . cold and frightened, as she did on seeing an unnatural reflection of herself in a bit of distorted glass: an image that was all great rubbery mouth or one enormous eye in the forehead. She knew it was not true, but at the moment it seemed true. “Steady, steady, steady,” she whispered to herself as she would to a frightened colt.

Trinidad’s voice went on: “Your father loves you so much, idolizes you so, that he can deny you nothing in this world. Remember that! If you were to come home leading a cannibal by the ring in his nose and say, ‘Father, I cannot live without this man!’ he would die of inward torture, but to you would say, ‘You have my blessing.’ It will kill your father to stand by and see, or worse – to stand by and guess at what must happen to you if you marry my nephew.”

The conviction in Trinidad’s voice reached Raquel and shook her, but she did not speak.

“Fausto is not a bad man . . . he is worse: what the Mexicans call *desgraciado*, ill-starred, dogged by misfortune. Even his name, Fausto, is supreme irony . . . perhaps one of his mother’s little jokes. He should be called Infausto instead of by a name meaning fortunate and happy.”

The hard face looked long at Raquel, pleading with her to understand.

“I would not like to see you infected with his bad luck.”

“He has never been loved,” Raquel said.

“How do you know?” Trinidad shrugged. “A great many women have gone through the motions of loving him! But assuming that what you say is so: I don’t believe even a love like yours can give Fausto back to himself. He is not a whole person . . . part of him has been destroyed. Not even God can go back now and supply what is missing . . . he will always attract disaster.”

Somewhere within Raquel the words that Trinidad spoke awakened an echo, an overtone of the presentiment she had been conscious of the night of the ball. She shook herself.

"There would be little hope for the world if all were as you say, Doña Trini. Who are we to say what God can or cannot do? Until recently I believed that people were intended to be happy all the time. Now I know that we were not put into the world for happiness alone . . . the mask has two sides, happiness and suffering. We are not complete until we experience some of both. I know Fausto loves me . . . he doesn't say much. To me, words are second-hand emotions that the heart has already felt and shown in the eyes. Love works miracles. He needs a home and family to love and work for, something bigger than himself. I know you are thinking of my dowry, which isn't small. The circumstances add up to a new birth, a complete new life for Fausto."

Trinidad Hidalgo looked Raquel over slowly and thoroughly.

"My nephew isn't fit to wipe your shoes! If you want to throw yourself away, why don't you found a school or a hospital? At least retain your mental liberty!"

Raquel shook her head. "I want to live! I want to live with Fausto Hidalgo."

Trinidad finished a glass of sherry, then lit a cigarette and puffed at it. She appeared to Raquel to be marshaling her forces for a new attack. At last she said softly: "Let us forget all these nebulous, tenuous reasons and get down to cold facts: for instance, the way you live now. You go out with your father to concerts and theaters. You go to parties and dances. You enjoy music together; sometimes you play cards. You read books in many languages and discuss them."

Raquel nodded.

"You even enjoy drinks together! I imagine you ride, perhaps even shoot. In the summer you go to the ocean for the bathing . . . you are a woman of the world."

"In a way," Raquel agreed.

"The very things Fausto admires in you now, worldly charm and a certain sophistication, will be the first things he will stamp out in you. Every view you hold that does not correspond with his views will be, to him, an immoral point of view. In spite of his American birth and upbringing, the man is as Spanish as Torquemada!"

"Don't you think that a charming home, where his friends are welcome, a place where an atmosphere of gaiety and intelligence is felt, will shine its light into the dark corners of his life?"

"For your sake, my dear, I wish it could be so. But when you were a little girl did you never bounce a rubber ball against a brick wall?"

Even through her hurt, Raquel felt the woman's sincerity. Doña Trinidad rose and put her arm around Raquel. "I hope you know I had to do this."

Raquel nodded.

"I have just one more thing to tell you," the woman said. "It isn't worth much, but it might come in handy sometime. Watch out for the small, apparently insignificant reasons behind meanness. You are too big to look for littleness in others. When things happen that have no apparent cause, look for some dark, bitter seedling – a little moldy bruise on the heart. Fausto has been hurt in a spot that is difficult to heal – his self-esteem. He gave that cold blonde American girl his best . . . the finest ranch house on the Border. She did plenty to him, but it is my personal and entirely feminine conviction that the final act in Fausto's destruction was an unfortunate phrase she used to him. In front of a group of her friends she said that Fausto's house was not fit for pigs to live in. Always remember that – for he will never forget it! You may accuse a man of theft or murder, and live with the hope of some day being friends. But if you tell a man his breath is bad, he will hate you till the day he dies." Trinidad's eyes burned into Raquel's. "Well, I've done what I had to! The harm will be if I have not only failed to influence you, but lost the chance at your friendship into the bargain."

Raquel studied the face of the woman before her. The knowledge that she was loved made her kind. She put her hand on Trinidad's arm.

"With only a few exceptions, everything you have said to me, I already knew – and from Fausto. I know it cost you an effort to say all these things to me, and I appreciate it. But nothing can change me: Fausto Hidalgo is all that I shall ever know of heaven or of hell."

"There isn't anything much to say, is there?"

Raquel kissed Trinidad's cheek. "Just thank you, and good-bye."

Fausto Hidalgo took his bride to the house that had more than once been the refuge of political exiles. Raquel had never seen such a house. Small, low-ceilinged rooms, and narrow windows; galleries heavily latticed and vine-covered made it possible to see without being seen. The house was directly across a muddy street from Fort Brown. During the nights when Raquel waited for Fausto to come home, she watched the drunken soldiers staggering back to the barracks. Often the narrow board that served as a bridge across the gutter slipped and Raquel would put her fingers in her ears. The monotony and lack of inventiveness in their cursing sickened her.

Raquel expected her child in another month.

'*Febreros locos,*' she smiled to herself, 'I hope he is born in February, even though all February people are crazy.'

She turned her head at the sound of carpet slippers slithering across the matting. It was Fernando, Fausto's houseman, carrying the coffee tray.

"The Patrón has come," he said. Raquel nodded to him to put the tray down. She watched his wiry figure as he left the room.

'By what name do we call such as Fernando? Caretaker? Guardian? Certainly not servant . . . any more than Cholly is a servant.'

Fausto came in and threw himself into a chair. The fine lines around his eyes had deepened and Raquel knew that he had been in the sun long hours. 'He looks older than thirty-eight,' she thought, 'because of unhappiness.'

He got up and walked about the room with the short, springy steps of men accustomed to spending long hours in the saddle. He wore high-heeled boots of softest leather.

'I don't believe he could take a step in ordinary shoes,' Raquel thought.

"This house is a frightful place," Fausto said irritably. He glanced up angrily at one corner of the ceiling where a great black butterfly clung motionless.

"You don't believe that nonsense, Fausto?" Raquel smiled.

"Have Fernando or Soledad sweep it out at once. I have had enough of this! When I build there will be screens across the windows so fine that not even a mosquito can come in." He sat down to drink his coffee.

"We could repair this one a little . . . " Raquel said.

"It's no use. This is only temporary. The minute that I can get the lots I want, I'll start. The finest architects from New Orleans will do the house. White! It must be white . . . and splendid. Stone, solid and enduring . . . there will be nothing like it on the Border. Perhaps not even in the whole state." His eyes were like the eyes of an Arab, dark and full of dreams.

"So long as there is contentment, Fausto, we don't need magnificence."

"Why don't we? A man's home reflects his worth. It shows what he thinks of his family. It is a monument to his name."

"That's true, Fausto, but with the ranch house so beautifully built . . . "

Fausto glared at her. "I wish it were burned to the ground this minute."

Raquel shuddered.

"A new, spotless house . . . tiles, black and white tiles, that can be scrubbed every day, crystal chandeliers . . . the chandeliers that were made for Maximilian and Carlota can be had. I shall never stop till I get them."

Raquel smiled. "I hope they bring us more happiness than they did to that poor pair."

"Happiness!" Fausto's face was bitter. "Why must everyone think of nothing but being like Slobbery Willie, the idiot, playing with molasses and feathers on his fingers?" He put his cup down and began to walk again. "I want a palace for my son! A house so handsome that no living creature can say he has a better one. There is money and there is land. If there isn't enough money, there will always be land and more land, inexhaustible and forever! What good are a few acres of dusty chaparral? What good is hard gold in the bank? My house . . . even people who don't know my name can see me in the street and say, 'That's the man who lives in the big white house!' "

Raquel looked at him with anxiety.

"Possessions aren't enough to make people like you, Fausto. You have to have something more."

"Who wants them to like me?" He seemed very tall and straight in his arrogance. "A man who has the best of things needs nothing else . . . for everything else betrays him. Everything else splits on him."

"Not friends, Fausto."

"Friends! Offer them free drinks and your house is overrun in an hour."

"We have to have affection . . . "

"You can buy it with a five-dollar bill."

Raquel watched him intently, trying to fathom the depth of his suffering.

'Has my year of patient love and toleration gone for nothing? Will he always be a man possessed of an evil dream, a man ridden by a desire to justify himself for crimes he never committed?' She had learned from living with him that stillness had power over him as no amount of talk had. She kept her thoughts closely guarded. 'What can I give this man? Is there anything I can give him, or that anyone can give him, in the place of this chimerical ideal?'

He turned his face to her at last.

"You do want me to have it . . . you understand how important it is that we have the most impressive house on the Border? I want people to look up to my son and know what kind of a home he comes from . . . "

"Let us worry about your son when he gets here," Raquel said "You know that I want, more than anything else in the world, to see you happy."

"I don't think it is in me, Raquel, to be happy."

Raquel did not have the courage to ask him if he was disappointed in her.

"Then, Fausto," she said, "I can only say that I should like to see you have what you want."

He came close to her and kissed the top of her head.

"That, my Raquel, is as close as I shall ever come to being happy."

THE LAST WEEK OF MAY, nineteen hundred and eleven, was a memorable week for Raquel. She wondered if anything would ever happen in her life that could arouse the wild joy and exultation she felt when her father came to visit her.

He said nothing when Fausto explained the reason for staying in the small house near the Fort. Raquel saw a faded and resigned look come into his eyes.

The night O’Riordan arrived from Durango he and Raquel sat on the gallery talking almost all night. Fausto stayed for a long while, restless and inimical. Raquel knew he was angry when she did not come to bed with him, but stayed up talking to her father. ‘He is afraid we are going to talk about him,’ she thought. ‘He does not really trust me any more than he trusts strangers.’

“The little ones are like twins,” O’Riordan said. “Like twin dolls in size, but such contrast in personality I have never seen.”

Raquel nodded. “Consuelo is like you and Josefina is Fausto in skirts. It is funny, Father, but I feel embarrassed that they both have their birthdays in the same year, just a few months apart.”

"It will save you the bother of two birthday parties," O'Riordan said. "But I don't like the loss of the others. You are having them too fast."

"I don't know," Raquel said. "I want a son for Fausto . . . there is no time to waste."

"An American lady at the capital asked the Vice-President's wife how much difference there was in her children's ages, and she said: 'How much difference could there be? The natural time – ten months.' That's all very well for them, but you should see a physician. I would like to take you to San Antonio to a good man."

Raquel's heart leaped at the thought of getting on a train and going somewhere with her father. But she answered dully: "It's no use, Father. Fausto would never hear of it."

Between them on a stand was a tray with a bottle of whiskey and a pitcher of ice water on it. O'Riordan's cigar smelled good to Raquel. The vines that covered the porch gave off a sharp odor of cinnamon.

"Ten years of it!" O'Riordan said. "Is it to go on like this? Are you going to spend your whole life like an iceberg with nine tenths of yourself submerged? I'll bet you haven't had a dress on since the day you married him."

"It's true, I haven't," Raquel said. "There is nowhere to go, and if there were, Fausto wouldn't go."

"Tell me one thing, Raquel . . . you've never lied to me . . . is he worth it?"

It took Raquel a long time to answer.

"I am his wife," she said at last. "What wizardry he has employed I shall never know, but he is my whole existence."

O'Riordan was silent. Raquel knew he was weighing the situation in his mind.

"You know you have just so many nickels to spend," he said at last. "You are the only judge of whether or not you spent yours wisely."

"I know, Father."

"You are deprived of music . . . there are no concerts, nothing. You never get any new books except what I send."

"We are waiting until the new house is finished . . ."

"Did you never hear that an egg is better today than a chicken tomorrow? The way he is trying to build that house, with his highflown ideas, it may never be finished."

"Isn't it odd, Father . . . how we can't go back? We can't go back to anything . . . nothing is ever the same. I know you want to take me out while you are here, but it's no good any more. Everything is different."

"Everything is very different," he said. "I can only have faith in your destiny. Your faith may work miracles. For your sake, I hope so."

The night was still and Raquel heard the tramp of the heavy-footed soldiers returning to Fort Brown. One of the men slipped into the ditch and began the steady dull stream of cursing that took place nearly every night.

O'Riordan groaned.

"To have this at your door!" he said.

Raquel laughed softly.

"Have you forgotten, Father? Once when I complained to you as a girl when the miners were using bad language and you said to pay no attention, that if I were a lady, I wouldn't know what the words meant, and if I did know, then the swearing didn't matter."

"I talk too damn much!" her father said. "You are always confronting me with my own words of wisdom . . . they come back like a boomerang! But I admire my own wisdom in telling you that!"

"I don't think anything in the world can hurt you if you don't let it," Raquel said. "That sounds callous, but I have come to feel no surprise at anything people say or do. It is the environment speaking."

"You'll need that attitude all the rest of your life."

"I know it. There is no remedy. Don't waste time on me, Father . . . I want to know about you. What is your life like? Is there someone . . . "

"No, Raquel, there isn't. Your mother's memory . . . and who could ever come up to her mark anyway? The Mexicans are right: of a good thing, a little suffices. My life isn't too bad. Politics interest me as they do all the old."

"Don Porfirio's exile hurt you," Raquel said.

"Yes," O'Riordan said. "I have only had one other day as bitter in my life." Raquel said nothing.

"The tragedy is," he went on, "that out of a family of brilliant men, the only fool in the lot was chosen to succeed Díaz as President. The prosperity of theDíaz régime is gone forever . . . as is the security. I am going to San Antonio from here. If I can arrange it I want to transfer some of my holdings."

"As bad as that?"

"Worse."

His voice sounded old and full of tears to Raquel. She longed to reach her hand out for his to comfort him. 'But I cannot,' she thought. 'The exile of his beloved friend Porfirio Díaz is not his greatest loss.'

In the May dusk of nineteen hundred and fifteen, Raquel Hidalgo rocked in the dim patio of the house that had taken nine years and eighty thousand dollars to build. She loved the dark, the quiet dusk so near the eternal night.

'The fifteen years of my marriage to Fausto have been spent in the dark,' she thought.

Immediately after the earthquake in San Francisco he had set about building the house. 'Why,' Raquel thought, 'with thousands homeless, did he have to build this pretentious emptiness?'

The panic that swept over the United States the following year affected even Brownsville. Workmen, imported from the East, left the job and scurried home. Much of the material in the house came from abroad and was endlessly slow in arriving. The iron grillwork was copied from the lacy splendors of the Alhambra and special workers were required to install it. They sickened and were laid up with malaria. Raquel thought of the long, long months before Fausto would let her see the house. With dreadful clarity she remembered the first night she saw the foundation. That night, as she and Fausto were driving back to the little house by the Fort, shrieks and drunken yells filled the streets. Bands of marauding black men seethed through the town, shooting and killing. It was the night the Negro troops in Fort Brown mutinied.

That night Raquel lost her third baby.

As she rocked, she glanced at the patio. 'A thousand obstacles to the completion of the house have been put in Fausto's path . . . but he persists!' The trees and shrubs in the patio were only beginning to fill out.

'It's too new . . . we are still camping out!' Raquel thought. 'We have never really moved in; our spiritual trunks have not been unpacked.'

The ornate white house showed no sign of life. Out the front door Raquel could see the white cast-iron rabbits crouched in frozen attitudes among the lilies on the lawn.

'They seem to be waiting in alarm for something,' she thought. The melancholy opulence of the place struck her forcibly.

'The house is dead . . . stillborn. It is lying in state for all the world to see. It seems to say: "Pass by! Pass by! But slowly . . . miss no detail of my magnificence. Admire, but do not come close! Look at me and know that I am the fruit of long, back-breaking hours of toil in the dark recesses under the earth; the price of thousands of horns, hoofs, and hides that once blackened the prairies; the exchange for countless acres of river silt, richer than the golden soil of the Pharaohs. Look at me and acknowledge that my owner is a rich man who values the visible and the tangible . . . the hard, reassuring feel of stone and mortar. A man who does not miss laughter, the Bird of Dawn, that never sings in his house.'

Weakening futility flooded Raquel. Was this all there was to living? This mole-like burrowing?

'Life at the ranch would be serene and healthful for all of us,' she thought. 'Here all is sterile. What will it take to make this house a home? The girls walk too quietly; they don't run and shout as they should. Even my piano hasn't helped much. The children enjoy it as I do, but always Fausto runs from the sound.'

She remembered the night her piano arrived from Durango. The great ebony instrument was set up in the drawing room. Raquel was so hungry for music that she sat up all night playing, even though the piano was badly out of tune.

'Fausto paced the hall and threw cigarette stubs one after the other into the fountain. When I could no longer bear his protesting figure, I got up and closed the door . . . the latch of the new door stuck. I went to the window for air. Fernando and some neighbor's servants were sitting under the windows listening. I saw the crescent of red coals that were their cigarette tips. After that night, Fernando lost some of his dislike for me. Always before he seemed to feel that I was responsible for his master's unhappiness.' Raquel turned her head at the sound of felt-soled slippers crossing the tiles. She saw Soledad taking a pitcher of cold water to her bedroom.

'How could I blame Fernando? He is to Fausto what Cholly is to me . . . mother and father! He always seemed to be saying to himself: "All this love-making

. . . this passion! And no boy? Only two girls and four little nameless beings that never saw the light of day! Even the cool, blonde Yanqui gave my master a son!" What a state to get into, brooding about the houseman's disappointment.'

She took quick inventory of the fifteen years of her marriage.

'When,' she asked herself, 'did Fausto fall out of love with me? Where did I fail him?' Then she thought, 'Perhaps I never had him. The barrier was too high and the stone wall too set to break through. How could he stop loving me when he has never loved me except physically?'

The dullness, the sense of captivity, and the feeling of physical slavery to Fausto were as nothing compared to the shattering loss of her father. With him all hope seemed to die. The horror of the day and the night she went through when she received O'Riordan's letter of farewell would be with her always.

'Always and forever,' she thought, 'unless I can raise myself from this swamp and live up in some degree to his ideal of me.'

Her existence was Spartan in spite of the large dowry she brought with her. Under the law Fausto had absolute power over the money and was not accountable to her for one cent of it. He had not consulted her about the building and furnishing of the house in Brownsville. After the death of her father, she hadn't cared.

'My existence is entirely physical . . . the life of the hetairai: bathing, polishing, and beautifying the body for Fausto's enjoyment. I am to him a kind of pagan idol . . . headless as the Venus is armless.'

For a moment she wondered if Fausto were one of those people her father spoke of, those individuals born with their souls left out.

'The only thing in this world he loves is this house. If I could give him a son, the image of himself, it would change the focus of his love.' She felt discouraged. 'When the life of the intellect is stifled and joy goes, the vital force of the body is lowered. I am sure of this. I believe that is why each successive pregnancy is more hopeless than the last . . . I wish there were some wise person I could talk to. Trinidad refuses to help me unless I see a doctor. Fausto would kill me with his bare hands.'

Instinctively she put her hands over the slight swelling under her breast. Her pregnancy was almost entirely concealed by the lacy sacque and petticoat she wore. 'Funny how all of us on the Border wear them. We scarcely ever wear anything else after the wedding day.' Raquel's diminutive elegance was still apparent and her beauty had not diminished. There was evident in her face the refinement of feature that comes from having endured much.

'In spite of the vegetable existence and the waste of myself, I feel no resentment. It must be that I am a congenitally happy person, for I take a quiet, animal kind of comfort from little things: trivial things like clean clothes, steaming hot coffee, and my good bath.' She rose from her chair and pulled a leaf of lemon grass from a pot near the fountain. 'Music has given me courage. It is my joy to teach what I know to my girls . . . to see their talent grow under my guidance. Why won't he let me share it with him? Always he walks away. Books. "Books give women ideas, he says."' She rubbed the fragrant ribbon of grass between her fingers and felt the razor-like edge of it along her skin.

'I am glad my father can't see me like this! I know he would say, "Do something! Don't just sit there, Girl!"' She turned toward the drawing room, still musing. Tiny and seemingly defenseless, there was something about the erect figure that said, 'Do not push me too far.'

Endurance she had – the endurance born of desperation. She would endure anything to change her fruitless way of life: she knew better than anyone how slight the chances were of making any great or lasting change. Everything was against it: tradition, environment, and her own inertia born of habit. For she was old: thirty-five. By Border standards old enough to be a grandmother. Cut off from the world where things were happening, deprived forever of the companionship of her father, she knew with a knowledge buried in the most secret cells of her being that she had to demand something different for her own soul's health.

'I need an hour with The Old One.' She knew that the greatest moral support, the most vital assertion of the free will was to be found in the music of Bach. She raised the lid of her piano and sat down. 'Bach is a tonic: a tonic like the rhythmic pounding of a clean, cold surf – '

For perhaps an hour Raquel lost herself in the intricacies of a fugue.

'Fugue,' she thought, 'is flight . . . a running away from brooding and hopelessness. The notes resolve themselves always into a pattern and the heart of the player is made whole again.' The ecstasy of co-ordination lifted her out of herself, held her entranced so that she jumped when the door opened suddenly. Fausto came in dusty and warm.

"Can't you play anything but that noisy babble?"

"You startled me, Fausto!" Raquel shut the piano.

"You jumped because you were off somewhere else. You get that crazy look when you play too long. The house could burn down and you would never know it!"

"That is what makes Bach great," she smiled. "Don't you want to bathe before Fernando brings your supper?"

He nodded. She could see that he was tired with a painful, jagged tiredness.

'If he would ever let me share what is troubling him, I might feel that I am really his wife. The best thing I can do for him is to keep very still.' She went over and stood by him. 'Dusty and sweaty, he still has the power to make my flesh clamor for him.' The freshness of her scent must have come to him, for he reached out blindly and crushed her in his arms.

"I like the way you smell," he whispered. "Don't go away off somewhere in your mind and leave me! I need you."

Raquel didn't answer. She laid her face on his breast.

'This is all we share,' she thought. 'What sorcery he uses, I shall never know . . . but I am frightened. Frightened by his need of me. Perhaps he is the man-child I should have borne. I don't know the answer at all . . . except that I have to nourish this hungry, groping creature. I must.' Her mind cried out in protest against the betrayal by her body. 'Always I forge my own chains,' she thought. In spite of her struggle to remember them, she forgot her fears and deprivations and lived for the moment. The dark passionate quest for each other soon ceased and comfort came like an adored hand laid on the breast.

* * *

RAQUEL ROSE EARLY . . . the cool mornings enchanted her.

'Monday morning!' she thought. 'Everyone has some daily task assigned, somewhere to go – a pattern to live by.' She looked into the street from her window as she drank her coffee and saw the stream of black-clad women go by to Mass. Long skirts and sacques of black cotton material constituted the daily costume of the Mexican women. Perpetual mourning for some member of the family kept them from ever varying the monotony of the garb, if indeed they cared. They walked decorously, eyes straight ahead, their hands folded modestly across their waists. Most of the women clutched a handkerchief with a few coins tied up in the corner. Raquel knew that after their devotions they would purchase the food for the day at the open stalls in the market. Some of them would buy bits of linen in the stores to make the delicate, spidery drawn-thread work that supported most of them. At night many a Mexican girl in an ill-smelling *jacal* would be putting her eyes out over the tedious work by the light of a single wax candle stuck into an empty bottle.

'And even so,' Raquel mused, 'they have more than

I. Before sundown little groups of them will "give the turn," go for their stroll around the town. They have seen the moving-picture house. Even though they may not have seen the performance, they walk up and down in front of it – they know it is there.' She was excited by the idea of moving pictures. She smiled as she remembered Soledad's description of the film she had taken the girls to see. "A woman with a face like an old mare belabored a fat man with a carpet-beater in a land where it rained continually! For two solid hours it rained!" Consuelo and Josefina told her of the beautiful young lady whose life seemed to be one emergency after another.

Josefina asked Raquel where the train went between the time they left the theater and next week's episode.

"You would love it, Mama," Consuelo said. Raquel thought she might find it gay, especially when the audience shouted the Sapanish translation of the English captions across the theater.

'That's what I miss,' Raquel thought. 'Little harmless diversions . . . gaiety! And above all, people.'

In fifteen years she had made only a few efforts at entertaining. She soon learned that it was not worth the trouble.

'If I could find the reason behind Fausto's dislike and distrust of people, I might be able to help him overcome it,' she thought. She missed the companionship of Father Leahy. Raquel and the priest read books in French and discussed them. Father Leahy had great taste and discernment as well as a subtle somewhat wry humor. Raquel shuddered as she remembered the afternoon Fausto stamped in to the patio where they were drinking coffee. They were laughing over something in Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme.*

"My aunt," Fausto said, "has surely told you what people said about my mother. I don't want them saying the same things about you. Never allow that priest in the house again."

'And it was the same with Carmen Barrera,' Raquel thought with nostalgia of Carmen's round mezzo-soprano that blended so beautifully with her own voice. They sang duets for hours at a time. 'We sang until Fausto said Carmen had a lover and was only coming here as a screen.' Bitterness surged into her as she thought of the needless cruelty Fausto had shown in forbidding her to sing with Carmen.

Raquel was about to ring for more coffee when she remembered that Soledad had gone to the stores. She went to the kitchen herself.

Fernando was showing the refrigerator to the servant of a neighbor. The cylindrical white porcelain icebox enthroned in Fausto Hidalgo's kitchen was apparently a source of wonder and envy to the housemen of the neighborhood. Fernando opened the door and twirled the revolving wire racks that held the food. Raquel watched him from the patio. Affecting great indifference, Fernando took a piece of raw beef on a platter out of the icebox. He assumed a deprecating air and eyed the meat distastefully, as though wondering whether or not it was fit to roast after all. It had been in the icebox a whole day. Raquel smiled to herself as she watched the unwary caller fall into the trap. He sniffed the meat and told Fernando not to be an idiot: the meat was every bit as good as though it had been slaughtered that morning and handed down right off the hook.

'Now he will really put on,' Raquel thought. Fernando shrugged and at last allowed himself to be convinced. 'The refrigerator settles many a score for Fernando,' she thought. 'The envy in the eyes of the other servants makes up for the snubs he receives in the shops. The state of the Hidalgo credit is common talk.'

Raquel often heard Fernando and Soledad bickering over ways and means of providing small necessities for the house.

'They think I don't know,' she mused. 'And I have to let them think I am in total ignorance. They could not bear to think I knew the true state of affairs. I heard Fernando tell Cholly yesterday that Fausto did not own, free and clear, so much as a coffin to drop dead in.' She felt hungry and wanted her breakfast, but did not want to disturb Fernando until his visitor was gone. 'He thinks I don't know why the big black figs disappear so fast! A family of twelve could not eat them all. He sells them and buys a bottle of anisette to treat his visitors, who are more numerous than mine.' She knew that was his roundabout way of showing his devotion. 'He has no intention of letting their long, agile tongues have anything to say about the treatment they receive in the Hidalgo kitchen.'

It occurred to Raquel that even though Fausto was short of cash and had little credit, they still lived fairly well. She had heard Fernando sneer at masters who sent their servants to buy, like any mendicant, a cent's worth of ground coffee every morning from the orderly lines of tight gray paper cones that held the precious stuff in the stalls at the market. He also had things to say about families who bought two chicken wings for themselves and a cent's worth of beans for the servants.

'Our beans are grown at the ranch, dried and stored in the pantry in hundred-pound sacks.' Raquel was proud of the ranch and again wished that Fausto had not sunk everything in the useless magnificence of the town house. 'We have our own corn, too. Each week Fernando hands out two bushels of corn to the woman who makes the tortillas. The task is so hard on knee and knuckle that I have never allowed Cholly to do it. There is no need to go into debt when we have so much provided from the ranch. I know Fernando trades part of the produce for things like sugar and coffee at the stores. But it is a point of honor with him to keep Fausto in ignorance . . . funny he never resents the fact that his master spent fourteen thousand dollars for chandeliers that belonged to an emperor when the grocer has not been paid in eight years. He simply goes ahead and fills in the gaps as best he can. Cholly sells her bits of lace to buy hair-ribbons for the girls.' Raquel flushed.

'I can't bear it!' she thought. 'With all my father left me! To be living off my servants. God knows when they were paid last.

'Even if there is any money left, I am so ignorant I wouldn't know how to get things done with it. The only way to make sure of money is to empty it into your head where no one can get it away from you. I'm nothing but a set of accomplishments . . . nice to have, but not much use. Trini talks about the American professional women; she says right in this town there is a lady postmaster, a woman court stenographer . . . there is a woman superintendent of schools . . . some of them even become doctors. All the Latin-American woman can do is to make lace or sweetmeats, if she is clever. A few of them give lessons in parlor French or teach loutish children to tinkle out a few tunes on a piano.' Raquel felt discouraged. 'It's too late. I'm always pregnant. I don't even know how to set about doing anything. I wish I had an American woman friend.'

The hopelessness of her situation seeped into Raquel. The income from the mines stopped shortly after her father's death. His managers and stewards fled for their lives disguised in their servants' clothes when the revolutionaries seized the gold and silver and blew up the mines.

'All I have left is his letter and a few hundred dollars in the bank in San Antonio. I have that small sum because Fausto never knew it was there.' Raquel sat up as though she had been slapped; she knew why she had kept that money hidden away.

'I was keeping that money to buy clothes for the girls later on . . . and for what reason? To buy clothes to attract men so they can continue this vicious treadmill. What they need is education, a trade at least, if a profession is out of the question. I never want them to be at the mercy of a man . . . and they will never become independent working wool pansies on canvas at the convent.' She rose and began to walk up and down the patio with nervous steps. How to begin — and where? Doña Trinidad came to her mind.

'I cannot depend on her for everything . . . too much has been done for me already. Suppose I should have to go out of the house for something? I could scarcely find my way in the streets.' The horror of a crippling existence struck her. 'I love my girls and am utterly incapable of helping them. They know more than I do.' She thought with tenderness of her children. Josefina with Fausto's looks and disposition – fiery, rash, and arrogant. Consuelo, heartbreakingly like Raquel's father, a quiet realist interested always in growing things. 'Even the handle of a broom will root for her,' Raquel mused. 'That gift must be turned to account somehow. And her funny poetic way of putting things!' Raquel's eyes brimmed as she thought of Consuelo's words to her the night before.

"Mamacita," she said, "whenever I even think of you, I smell star-jasmine!" Raquel wished her father could have heard Consuelo say that. 'How do I know he didn't?' She got up and went to her room. She went to her desk and took a letter from a drawer. She sat down to read her father's letter again.

'There is a bequest in it that I have missed,' she thought. 'I missed it because I was not ready, not capable of acting on it. This time I'll read it without crying.' The thin sheets of paper rustled in her hands. The words brought comfort.

> My child:
>
> When you see this letter written by another hand than mine, you will know what word it brings. Because you are who you are, and what you are – you will not break down. You have in you a strain of blood that will make you hard to break. It is only this

knowledge that lets me die with a decent show of resignation.

Between us there are no secrets, dead or alive. I love you for never betraying the fact that you paid much for little. I can only guess at what it has been and what it will be. Unfortunately, I am a good guesser. Where you are concerned, I have never yet had the luck to be wrong.

In money matters I have bungled things for you. The dowry system is all wrong. I was coming to Brownsville to teach you about handling the money from the mines when the silly little train turned over. In my clear moments between the merciful drugs, it seems to me that your greatest need for money will come when you are past thirty: you won't want to see your children doing without things. You'll have to learn the business for yourself now. Whatever comes from the mines will be paid to you monthly. Mendoza will go to San Antonio after he gives you this letter and tell the Cattleman's Bank of my wishes. They will not be wheedled out of your money as the local banks might. If any trouble comes up about the collections, remember that you became a citizen of the United States by marriage. Go to the Consul if you need help . . . it isn't likely that you'll be doing much traveling yourself.

I am racking my head for one last thing to give you. I think this is what you will need: courage! Courage to fight for and hold on to what you want . . . no matter what it is. If it's worth anything at all to you — keep it! The instant that you find out that it isn't what you want, don't be afraid to give it up. Don't stick with your mistakes too long. And don't be frightened of aloneness. We are never so alone as when we are with those who don't understand us.

You have yourself. What more could anyone need?

There is a big struggle ahead of you. Whoever is

> not called upon to struggle is forgotten of God. You have to live up to what is inside your own heart and head: don't set yourself a low mark.
>
> Educate the children. Teach them what you know so well yourself: that human relationships count for more than anything else in the world. They endure beyond the grave.
>
> Cherish Soledad. She is as good as bread and would die for you.
>
> I am a good son of the Church, but I am not a religious man. I believe we go on from here if we want to.
>
> You know, then, where I will be; in the air all around you, closer than ever before.
>
> As a miner, I know what fire can do to precious metal. I have only one regret: that I shall not see you a woman grown.

Raquel folded the letter and stared into space. The roll of her rocking chair became symbolical to her. 'How many miles have the women of my world rocked?' She thought of squirrels turning the wheels in their cages.

'Rocking, always rocking. A child on the way; a child in their arms; and a grandchild rocking in the cradle at their feet. Back and forth. Back and forth like idiots in an asylum, covering distance and never advancing an inch. Marking time. Marking time until someone gives the order, "Forward march." And the tragedy is that the order seldom comes. Usually death gives the order . . . "At ease." ' She unfolded the letter again:

' "Fight for what you want." I have given in without even a protest. What hope is there of helping my girls until I have the courage to do something for myself?' She looked at the cloisonné clock on her dresser. 'It is almost as late in the day as it is in my life!' She took a purse from a drawer and counted the money in it. 'I must have more than this! The bank will tell me how much is left of my dowry. I will send Cholly for a hack.' For a moment she wavered. 'It would be better to have Fernández come here and talk to me. But I would still be hiding behind these walls if I did that! No matter what Fausto does to me, I am going to walk into that bank and find out!' She hurried from her room as though afraid she might change her mind.

Soledad and Fernando were bickering in the kitchen. When Raquel appeared in the door, Soledad put down her iron and came to her at once.

"Get me a hack quickly, please. And my white lace shawl."

Soledad's eyebrows lifted slightly, but she did not speak. She took her black head-shawl from a nail on the kitchen wall and went into the street through the small blue door in the wall of the patio.

Raquel's heart pounded. She hoped there would be a cabman somewhere in the neighborhood. She thought she would suffocate if she had to wait long. Soledad appeared in the gate.

"He is waiting. I'll get your shawl."

Raquel threw her scarf over her head and stepped over the sill.

"You don't want me to come?" Soledad said.

Raquel shook her head and put her foot on the step of the cab.

"Where, Señora?" the cabman said.

'Where, indeed?' Raquel thought. For one floundering moment she felt as though she had lost her mind: she did not know the name of the bank.

"I have business with Don Miguel Fernández."

"Sí, Señora. At this hour he will be at the bank."

Raquel nodded and leaned back against the cushions. She felt as though she might be sick at any moment. The curtains of the hack were drawn, but Raquel felt that every passer-by on the streets must be staring at her. The ride was short. 'It only *seems* short, like the ride to the dentist's office,' she thought.

The driver brought the carriage up to the curb at the side entrance of the bank. 'He is trying to help me,' she thought. She told him to wait for her. Now that she was here, she dreaded walking into the bank in her lacy white house dress . . . until this very moment she had not given it a thought. The bank was almost empty. She walked to a door marked private and knocked. The smoke of an expensive cigar drifted out to her as the door opened. Miguel Fernández stared at her as though he distrusted his own vision.

"I want to talk to you," Raquel said.

"Señorita O'Riordan!" Fernández said, then blushed. "Forgive me, Señora. It has been many years. I wanted to call on you when your father died . . . "

"I know," Raquel cut him off with a gesture. "What I want to know is how much money there is left of my dowry."

Raquel watched the slow red creep into Fernández's warm olive skin again. She saw him pick up a pencil and turn it over and over in his slim, well-groomed hands. Once during the eternity of the moment, she thought he was going to tap a small silver call-bell and then she saw him change his mind.

"Don't tell me," she said quietly.

"The house, Señora. And the interest on previous loans. There is a large mortgage on the ranch. I have to tell you."

Raquel could not bear the brown eyes that looked at her with pity.

'Pity from a banker,' she thought. 'Tears from a stone.'

After a moment she asked, "Is there anything at all, free and clear, in my name?"

"Nothing in your name, Señora. The dower right is strong here. There is one parcel of land . . . insignificant and of no value whatever. It is *sacahuiste* prairie toward the Point. Not even the wild asses will graze on it. It is clear because no one is fool enough to lend a nickel on it."

"Thank you," Raquel said, and got up. Fernández escorted her to the carriage in silence. She saw him looking at the hired rig.

"Good-bye," she said, and told the driver to take her home. She was afraid Fernández might say some kindly word to her.

At the garden gate, Raquel paid the driver and rang the bell. She turned and saw three coarse Mexican youths brawling and tumbling in the gutter, yelling filth at each other in their harsh voices. They began to stare at Raquel and whisper to each other. She turned her back on them to ring the bell again . . . even then she could feel their malevolent glares. She could not understand what was keeping Fernando or Soledad . . . why they did not answer the bell. The evil-faced striplings were coming close to her . . . she could feel their footsteps creeping up on her. Their hard bare feet made a scraping sound against the brick sidewalk. She turned angrily to see what they wanted — to drive them away. When she turned, they threw handfuls of slimy gutter mud in her face. They jeered raucously and ran. The door opened suddenly behind her and Soledad caught Raquel as she fell.

'I am glad Fausto is at the ranch,' Raquel thought later that day as she lay on a lounge in the patio. 'I could not face him now. He would say it served me right to have mud flung at me for going out into the street. Perhaps it is just part of the affront I have received this day. No matter what he says to me, I am going to get back that one bit of worthless land. It will help cover my feeling of nakedness.'

Fernando and Soledad were making a noise in the kitchen. Soledad shouted: "Do you think we are like the poor who have to announce to the whole neighborhood by banging pots together that they have something to cook?"

In spite of her low spirits, Raquel smiled.

"You belong out on the ranch with seventy-five thousand acres to rattle in. You're not housebroken!" Soledad's voice was harsh.

Fernando made a derisive sound.

"The ranch!" Raquel heard him mutter.

"The ranch is too good for you . . . both you and your master!" Soledad went on. "It's too sensible and prudent a life for His Lordship. . . . Pomp! He must have pomp!"

"The ranch holds too many sad memories for Don Fausto," Fernando growled.

'Here I am,' Raquel thought, 'eavesdropping on my servants again. But it's no worse than living off them!'

"The ranch wasn't good enough for the stiff-necked, shirtless *gringa* your fine master married." Soledad was on her favorite topic. Raquel knew what would come next.

Fernando's voice bristled. "Don't you dare refer to Doña Laura — may she rest in peace — as a shirtless *gringa* — you convent-trotting old witch! American she was . . . and even if she had no dowry, her father was very rich! And a senator!"

"*Gringa* I called her and will call her again!" Soledad shouted. "She didn't like the Mexicans, nor ranch life . . . nothing! Nothing but showing herself off half-naked at the State Capital. She had the impertinence to refer to the ranch-house as rustic!"

Raquel could almost see the contempt in Soledad's face as she spoke. She too loved the sturdy ranch-house with the hand-hewn beams of ebony and the fireplaces of pale petrified wood like honey-colored marble.

Raquel's reverie was broken into by Fernando's angry voice. "Listen, Old One! She was used to more than you ever saw! She was discontented because she was so far away from her family and friends."

"You don't tell me?" Soledad's voice was vinegar. "And what did she do when her fine friends came from Austin to surprise her? Ah, you with the dyed mustache, you have no answer for that! Instead of offering them the best she had, she cried and stamped her feet like the ill-bred upstart that she was. Doña Laura showed her plebeian origin that day! She apologized for her house, and said right in front of her husband that it was not fit for pigs to live in! I spit on such a woman!"

Raquel had seldom heard such a vitriolic account of the episode.

Fernando's voice came at last. "Your tongue is worse than the fangs of a rattlesnake, Soledad. How you can receive the Blessed Sacrament every day is beyond my comprehension. Doña Laura was in a delicate condition, more than seven months along. The ranch was a shambles that day; the neighbors were there for a cockfighting main . . . all the servants but myself had sneaked off to place a few bets. No food was ready, no one answered the bells. No wonder the Señora was affronted!"

"If her condition was so delicate, why did she force you to hitch that wild team to the surrey? She should have stayed at home like a respectable woman if she was so eager to present Don Fausto with an heir. Everyone knows she was a tiger! Even the master couldn't control her. When her friends refused to take her back to Austin with them, she made such a scene that Don Fausto grabbed his hat and fled to the brush like a whipped dog! You told me so yourself!"

"What did you expect him to do?" Fernando yelled. "Drag her around the room by her braids? In her condition? I had to hitch the team for her . . . don't ever think she wouldn't have done it herself if I refused! I climbed the high corral fence when she drove off and saw the horses bolt with her."

"Oh yes" – Soledad's voice was bitter. "We've had this tale sung, danced, and recited till we know it by heart: how the steep riverbank dropped out from under the runaway team and carriage, and how the boy was born, and they both died only a few minutes before you got there!"

"And you can speak irreverently of such a thing?" Fernando was almost crying. "A quarter of an hour earlier and we might have saved the little creature for his father's consolation!"

"To bring up with his other bastards?" Soledad asked. "Doña Laura is a suicide – and burning in hell at this minute."

Raquel shuddered. She wanted to go away out of earshot, but could not force herself to.

"God save us all from your tongue, Soledad!" Fernando said. "Is there no limit to your venom?"

"Do you want to know why I am venomous? Because Don Fausto has thrown away his time, his money – the inheritance of my señora and her children – trying to impress a woman in hell! From down there she can see none of this marble mausoleum he built! All the money he paid for Masses will not get her out of that fire! Her sin was not just destroying herself, but destroying the heart and soul of Don Fausto. He laughs at the poor *pelados* – ignorant and superstitious he calls them – who place food on the graves on All Souls' Day. Don Fausto sacrifices to her every day . . . and feeds his own self-love at the same time! His castle, indeed! It should have a name, like all castles: *Amor Propio!* I wish he were at the bottom of the sea with Castle Self-Love around his neck! This is an unhealthy place! The dead command here!"

Raquel was perspiring. She got up and went to her room. It was almost as though Soledad had spoken for her.

THE NEXT DAY Raquel still brooded over her journey into the world. The certainty that there was nothing left of her marriage portion did not sicken her so much as the mud-throwing by the Mexican ruffians. It left a nasty, clinging feeling like a spiderweb across the face.

'Why did they do that to me?' she thought. 'They were very bold to molest someone from a house like this . . . can Fausto be right in never allowing us to go out? Suppose they should take it into their heads to molest the girls on their way from school?'

She was glad she had not allowed Soledad to mention it to the girls . . . she did not want them frightened. 'I've got to send them away to school somehow . . . away out of this fetor.'

The girls were at the gate, clamoring for their chocolate and bread and butter.

Consuelo kissed her mother and went to look at her plants. She would soon be fourteen and already Raquel could see the young buds of her breasts. 'We must have a talk soon,' she thought.

"Look, Mama! They are taking," Consuelo cried. She held up a bottle of gardenia cuttings she was root-ing. Pride shone in her face. "There is a Yanqui girl at the convent . . . she tells the most awful lies, Mama! She says her father makes sweet oranges grow on bitter orange trees and sells them to people far away from here for lots of money! The things that girl says!"

"It's quite possible, Concha. Your grandfather had an apple tree in Durango that bore three kinds of apples at one time."

Consuelo's eyes grew big. "Different colors, even?"

Raquel nodded. It hurt her to think that her children had reached this age without seeing anything but a squalid Border town, and little enough of that.

"Different colors, like in a fairy tale."

Consuelo spoke at last. "I would rather have that tree than the treasure of Montezuma."

"If you are patient – and work hard, you can have even better trees than that. I am going to find out where people go to study plant-breeding."

Consuelo looked at Raquel and smiled. "You forget that I am a girl. And Papa would never let me."

"Would you like to make your living by growing things, Concha?"

"That would be beautiful! But I'm not clever, Mama. The nuns say so."

"I think the little nuns have already taught you most of what they know."

The girl looked at her mother intently, but said nothing.

'She believes me,' Raquel thought. 'By daring even to talk of something different, I have inspired new interest in her. I must make it come true!'

Josefina came out with her mouth full of bread and butter.

"I got a whipping with the pointer today," she boasted.

Raquel looked at the arrogant figure in front of her . . . slim, dark, and haughty. Josefina's face was all eyes, and white, flashing teeth.

"And for what?" Raquel asked.

"I was standing on the grand piano in the music room at recess, and Viva Scribner came by and said Papa was a broken-down, presumptuous snob. So I jumped on top of her and knocked her down."

"You deserved the whipping. You should not have stood on the piano."

For an instant Josefina eyed her mother. Then she threw back her head and laughed wickedly.

'She is beginning to think I am almost human,' Raquel mused. 'They're quite a shock to me, too. They're people! Even giving them their music lessons hasn't brought me close to them. For so long they have just been something to keep quiet and out of Fausto's way that I don't even know them.' She watched them moving about the patio. . . . Consuelo walked calmly, placing her feet firmly on the ground. Josefina seemed to have wings on her heels.

'Josefina acts the older and more knowing of the two,' Raquel thought. 'There is a lot of her grandaunt Trini in her! I hope she nurtures that quality of aggressiveness . . . it is unlikely that anyone will take advantage of Josefina.'

The girls sat down at the edge of the fountain and began playing jacks. Raquel watched their beautiful hands in motion as they tossed the small rubber ball into the air and caught it after deftly scooping up the jacks. One combination followed another, each more difficult than the one before.

'The traditional rules that games follow!' Raquel thought. 'Children in ancient Egypt must have played just such a game.' The twinkling, sure hands fascinated her. 'The hand, the true index to character! Father always said man conquered the world when he found out that he could place his thumb opposite any one of his fingers.'

The skill with which Consuelo and Josefina snatched the tiny points of the jacks made Raquel happy.

'It is proof that they are clever, normal little girls. The fumbling, boneless hands of slow-witted people have always filled me with horror.' She leaned forward in her rocker as the game progressed. It was Consuelo's turn, with a particularly difficult catch to make. She tossed the ball into the air. Without thinking, Raquel reached out, circled the bouncing ball with her hand, picked up the jacks and caught the ball neatly. The girls yelled with delight.

Soledad came from the back of the patio, attracted by the noise.

"My second childhood," Raquel said.

Soledad smiled. "The first one was too short."

She spread a lace cloth on a small table. Fernando followed with a tray of dishes and silver. His carpet slippers made scarcely any noise on the tiles. A thin thread of smoke trickled from the corn-shuck cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

"How tranquil everything is here!" he said.

"Let us have something good to eat for a change!" Soledad snapped. "Some people are so stingy they won't cook an egg for fear of throwing away the shell."

"Look who's giving herself airs! Those cords standing out on your neck! I could pluck them with my finger and they would go 'kling' like the strings of a guitar!" Fernando stepped quickly around the table.

"You're wise to step out of reach . . . like a cat that sees the broom!" Soledad glared at him.

"See, Doña Raquel! The Old One really loves me! She cannot keep her hands off me. At night I have to lock my door . . . all night long passion makes her restless and she prowls the corridors looking for me!" Fernando fled to the kitchen.

"Looking for you!" Soledad shouted, "and you snoring like a trombone!"

Raquel and the girls sat quietly enjoying the performance. Raquel noticed the faint glimmer of the street lanterns against the tender evening darkness. Fernando brought the fruit for the center of the table and went to turn on the lights.

"Just one, please," Raquel said.

"*Músicos!*" Josefina said as they sat down. A strolling band stopped in front of the house.

'How different the music is these days! . . . The sentimental songs are gone.' Raquel thought of the joy these wandering bands had always given her. 'They hardly ever play "Angel's Serenade" any more. Political unrest has crept into the songs and they reflect the troubled spirit of the people.' The musicians were singing a street song: a song with a hurrying, pulsating, overpowering rhythm. The beat insistent and demanding . . . knocking, knocking, knocking to be let in. Never relaxing or relenting.

Raquel smiled to herself.

'They wear down resistance by unwearying reiteration. It's savage music, simple and full of destiny. It is charged with the inevitable quality of life . . . that mad, loud singer is opening wide his whole being along with his throat in the hope that his persistence will one day give him what he wants from life.'

The unflagging march of the song ended suddenly . . . as suddenly as it had begun.

'They never slow down, never diminish! All at once comes the high cry at the end . . . release at last.'

The *músicos* walked away and Raquel felt as though she had been inside the singer's mind.

"That music is life itself," she said to the girls. "It goes on and on . . . because it must."

They were silent for a long time. Raquel thought they were thinking over what she said. At last Consuelo spoke.

"How nice it is when Papa is away!"

Wednesday morning Raquel woke earlier than usual.

'Last night was like a dream,' she thought. 'I have been hungry for company and never saw what was right under my nose.' She dressed quickly after her bath and went to the small gilt desk by the window.

'If I sit down in a businesslike fashion in front of this desk, it will help me to think.' She took writing paper from one of the pigeonholes and placed it in front of her. The delicate Japanese rice paper was part of the lot her father had given her before she married. She noticed that it was turning yellow around the edges.

'Except for a few letters to him, it has never been used. I must find a clean sheet.' When the paper was in front of her, she smiled.

'Now I must find someone to send this letter to!' Doña Trinidad was in Washington. It would take many days for the letter to reach her and for the reply to come back. Impatience took hold of Raquel. 'I want to know, and I want to know quickly, what I have to do to start the education of the girls.'

The thought came to her that even if she had sufficient money, there might be other requirements. The schools might expect a certain degree of education that her children did not have. She knew that Christian Doctrine, water-color painting, and needlework formed the major part of their study at the convent.

'Suppose a good school won't take them? Will they be condemned to a life of lace-making? What do American children of the same age know?' Raquel remembered that Trinidad had once told her that the superintendent of schools was a woman. 'She will tell me! How awkward . . . I don't even know her name. But I can begin "Dear Madame."' She stated briefly what she wished to know about enrolling the girls in boarding school. Then she tore the letter up: 'I am so rusty. I did not tell their ages, nor what education they had . . . and, most important, I forgot to ask what such a school would cost.' When the letter suited her, Raquel called Soledad.

"Take this to the post office yourself, and say nothing about it to anyone."

All day she wondered how she would endure the days until the answer came. Where would she begin if her dream of school could not be carried out? 'There must be knowledge and education somewhere in this country for those who seek it! I have been out of the world so long that I need schooling as much as the girls do.' She began to look over fashion books that Trinidad had given her. She hoped to see pictures of schoolgirls and what they wore. 'I want them to have the right things: the things that mean so much to youth. Nothing tacky or homemade-looking. They must have great *chic* and distinction.'

She got out her jewel case and looked over her mother's jewelry. 'All of it is fine, much too fine for me ever to wear in this kind of life.' She let the satiny pearls slide through her fingers regretfully. The diamond earrings would make two lovely rings, one for each of the girls when they were old enough to wear them. 'I have never worn them . . . diamond earrings make women look old.' The garnets that she loved flashed up at her from the velvet lining of the case. She fingered the long string of pearls again: 'It will hurt to do it,' she thought, 'but they will do more for the girls inside their heads than they will around their necks.'

Thursday at the hour of the afternoon coffee Raquel heard Fausto's voice in the patio and went out to meet him. He was deeply tanned from the days in the open air.

"Was the roundup good?" Raquel asked.

"Regular. What's new here?"

"Nothing much, except that I have been doing a little thinking."

"Save yourself the trouble. It's slow poison."

"I can't agree with you, Fausto. It's time we had a talk."

"About what?"

"Everything. The future of the girls . . . finances . . . "

"Understand this once and for all, Raquel: financial matters are not your concern. Don't begin meddling in what is not your business." He turned his back on her and started toward his room. Resentment at his tone, his closed mind, and his overbearing manner gave her courage.

"Just a moment, Fausto." She spoke sharply and stepped in front of him. She thought he looked shocked as though a dog or a cat had spoken to him. "Since almost all the money and some of the land came from my marriage settlement, I have the right to ask questions!"

Fausto stared at her for a long time.

"Are you feeling quite yourself?" he said at last.

"Yes, Fausto. Quite. For the first time in years."

"What's been going on behind my back? It sounds as though my aunt had been here!"

"What happened has nothing to do with your aunt, Fausto. I went to the bank to find out how much of my dowry was left."

The color washed out of his face, leaving it sallow and threatening under the tan.

"Did I understand you to say that you went to the bank?"

"Yes."

Two white lines stood out around Fausto's mouth. Raquel could see him hunting for words to describe her infamy.

"Who talked to you?"

"Miguel Fernández."

"Alone?"

"Naturally."

"Holy God! By this time I am the laughing-stock of Brownsville." He took a step toward Raquel. "How could you? Have you no shame?"

Raquel looked straight into his face. "Yes, Fausto, I have. But it isn't for myself."

Angry blood, clotted and dark, gathered in his face. Suddenly he turned . . . the door in the wall of the patio opened and Soledad stepped over the sill. Raquel saw that she had the letter.

"What are you hiding under that mantilla?" Fausto shouted. "Give it to me at once!" Soledad made no move to obey. Raquel signed with her head to hand over the letter. He snatched it and looked at the envelope.

"So now you are a go-between! Fetching letters to my wife." He ripped the letter open and read it, then threw it to the floor.

"There will be none of this nonsense either!" he said. "They will be ready for husbands in two years. Public school, indeed! In the same classrooms with great fully grown louts staring at their breasts! Have you seen them playing with boys on the playgrounds? Have you? I have! Tennis . . . jumping up and down shaking their hips! I'll see them dead first."

Raquel stooped down swiftly and picked up the letter. She put it in the front of her peignoir. The crisp white paper covered with neat clear writing was a talisman. She put her hand on the letter drawing courage from it even though she did not know what news it brought.

"There is one other thing, Fausto," she said. "I want you to deed me the Point Isabel land."

"Are you out of your mind? Even if I would consider such nonsense, the land is worthless. You have no claim on it anyway."

"I certainly do have a claim on it. It is valuable to me because it stands for something: for something that belonged to me and was taken away from me. I want it back."

"I have told you to put such idiocy out of your mind."

"You can tell me until you are black in the face and it won't do any good. I want that land."

Raquel saw the crafty look spread over Fausto's face.

"You have your jewels," he said.

She felt cold all over. 'If he had told me to walk the streets and see what I could drum up it would not hurt so much,' she thought. During the time she stared at him she made up her mind that she would make and sell paper flowers at the entrance to the cemetery before she would sell one piece of jewelry. When she spoke her voice was a whisper.

"Yes, Fausto, I have my jewels. I have some new ones . . . the really valuable kind . . . that I got in the last few days."

She turned her back on him and went into her bedroom. In a few seconds she heard the front door slam as though a tornado had banged it shut. Raquel began to tremble. She could not explain her own actions.

'I think it was that little bit of time to myself, those few days alone that let me gather courage to speak.' She sat down and took the letter from her bosom. It took a few seconds for the meaning of the words to sink in:

> Won't you look into the public schools here at home? We will help your daughters find their educational level. Students from the convent we find advanced in some subjects and retarded in others. We do not hold them back in subjects in which they excel. We give them special help to remedy their deficiencies.
>
> As taxpayers you contribute to the schools. Boarding schools are expensive and the nearest good one is in San Antonio. At this period in their lives it is very desirable that your girls have your guidance and companionship.
>
> I hope you will investigate our course of study and plan to enroll your girls in school in September. Please feel free to ask me for information at any time. I shall be glad to discuss the matter with you at your home any time you suggest.
>
> Sincerely yours,
>
> ELIZABETH CARTER

Raquel read the letter again. 'How good she is . . . and how kind! She knows I am not used to going out,' Raquel thought. 'She must have had dealings with many women like me — women who have lost touch . . . women whom the parade has passed by. Each of us thinks she is alone with her worries, but Miss Carter knows how many of us there are!'

LATE FRIDAY NIGHT, Raquel woke suddenly out of a deep sleep. She was glad she had her bed to herself, because she felt a tiny kicking inside her. He lives,' she thought happily. 'Such a beating of tiny fists and feet . . . this one is a lively fellow. I had almost forgotten about you, Sir . . . but now you call yourself to my attention!' Always in the many pregnancies she had begun, Raquel felt a thrill at the faint stirrings that went on within her. Often they were no more than the rustle of a bird's wing, but she loved the small guest of her body each time. This baby might be the salvation of the family. 'Fausto will take an interest in his son, for he is proud and wants a legitimate son and heir to carry on the name . . . proudly, not like those nameless half-children of his.'

She knew Fausto had gone back to the ranch in anger at her temerity. 'I could not help it,' she thought. 'He will come back when he feels like it, but I shall begin the same topic again. I have to dig my way out now or we shall be buried alive.' She went to sleep calm and almost happy.

Saturday morning Soledad appeared in the door of Raquel's bedroom. It was around eleven o'clock.

"Doña Trinidad Hidalgo is in the parlor," she said.

Raquel jumped up.

"How wonderful!" she said. "Isn't it exactly like her to send no word? Always the dramatic entrance for Trini!" She powdered her face and pinned up the little tendrils that clustered at the back of her neck. "It will be delightful to hear her scandalous conversation again."

Doña Trinidad was walking around the drawing room examining draperies and furniture with a rustle of silk and clank of bracelets. Clouds of Chypre filled the air.

"Not again, Raquel!" she said, holding her off at arm's length.

Raquel nodded.

"He is certainly a tireless ruffian." Trinidad fanned herself violently. It seemed to Raquel that Trinidad had changed a lot in the time she had been away. She was more wrinkled, used less rogue and mascara. Raquel thought she was letting the natural gray of her hair show. But her eyes had lost none of their fire.

'She always wears beautiful clothes.' Raquel looked longingly at the American Beauty taffeta petticoat that showed at the breath-taking slit in Trini's navy blue and white striped foulard dress.

"Tell me about yourself . . . and the world, Trini! What's happening?"

"The world's gone mad! This war . . . we'll all be in it before we know it! My foreman, that idiot Vidal, came to me this morning and wanted to know if it was true that the Germans did things to the little nuns. Foolishly, I said that was the story according to the papers. And now the imbecile is off to the war to disembowel Germans. And Mexico is upside down . . . those thieves and bandits that call themselves a government! It's shocking, but what can one expect after Wilson recognized them? He has the face of an old angel and the heart of a schoolboy . . . I'm afraid we're in for it!"

"You met the President?"

"Good fun, too! Told me some little green jokes that were just to my taste! My God, I'm choking to death . . . aren't you going to offer me a drink?"

Raquel rang for Fernando and asked him to bring some ice and brandy for Doña Trinidad.

"You still here?" Trinidad asked.

Fernando nodded and as he went out Raquel heard him mutter that he would still be here when the buzzards were picking Doña Trinidad's bones clean because she was too stingy to pay for her lot in the graveyard.

"Are you going to stay long?" Raquel asked.

"I don't think so. I came to settle some mess about my house. The Federal Government wants to buy it . . . but I won't sell. I have more money now than I can spend. Let them build their stupid Federal building when I'm dead . . . and that won't be for a long time!"

Raquel felt sure that Trinidad would live exactly as long as she wanted to.

"This cenotaph is looking very handsome," Trinidad said. "The thing must have cost a fortune! All this furniture, and the chandeliers!" She shook her head in wonder at her nephew's obsession. "But tell me about you!"

"Always the same, Trini. A few days ago I went to the bank to confirm something I was afraid was true."

Trinidad blinked her black eyes. "As bad as that?"

Raquel nodded. "But he's got to give me back the land down near the Point . . . I don't know why, but he must."

"It's not worth a damn," Trinidad said. "Let me do something for you, Raquel . . . you and the girls. I'm not going to die for a long, long time. Why should you have to wait until then? You need help now."

Raquel shook her head. She could not trust her voice.

"For your father's sake, Raquel!"

"It's for his sake that I can't take money from you. He provided for me, and if I have let his heritage be misused, I have to make up for it by doing something myself."

Trinidad sighed. "Because you are young, you want to take the long, hard road. Don't be a fool, Raquel. Never walk when you can ride. What could you do to remedy your situation, tell me?"

Raquel felt herself blushing.

"Very little actually," she said. "My mind is made up to put the girls in public school. I would like to go out with them occasionally and see that they make some friends among the young Americans."

"That's a very simple matter in the year nineteen hundred and fifteen, my dear. I would like to see you have something for yourself! Is that all you want, just to put the girls in school?"

"For the present, yes. I want them to have nice clothes and contact with other children. Eventually they must become self-supporting. Fausto will do everything he can to prevent it."

"Let him scream! You can call in the law if you have to. Education is compulsory here. The schools are free, but they will need books and things."

"We will manage somehow. Cholly and I can do needlework."

Raquel watched the flush come into Trinidad's face.

"It makes my blood boil!" she said. "One of the richest and most talented girls I ever knew! To hear you talk like that makes me sick."

"I can't help it, Trini. I have to do something for the girls and myself. Somehow I think it is of more value if I can do it with my own two hands."

Trinidad shrugged. "Every crazy person has his theme."

The girls appeared in the doorway of the drawing room.

"Come! Come and let me look at you," Trini called. The girls came forward rather shyly.

"Humph!" Trini said. "Waists like washtubs! I suppose they are still wearing Ferris waists?"

"I think they are too young for corsets," Raquel said.

"Not unless you want them to turn into dray horses! I bought them some corsets in Washington. Blue satin . . . and they are to be worn every day, do you hear? I don't want them growing up into *rancheras*."

The girls were eyeing Doña Trinidad's dress.

"I want a red silk petticoat," Josefina said.

"To wear to public school? You'll have nothing of the kind," Trini said. "You'll wear middy blouses and pleated skirts like every well-bred young girl. Tell me, how is your singing?" she asked Josefina.

'She is Trini's favorite,' Raquel thought, 'because they are so much alike.'

"It's all right," Josefina said. "I got in a fight with Sister Benignes because she crossed out a piece in Consuelo's music book."

"Why did she cross it out?"

"Because it was by Martin Luther . . . she said he was not only a German but a Protestant as well!"

Trinidad shook her head and laughed. "They are good women: the best! But you are too old for such fairy tales. Now let me hear you sing."

Josefina beckoned to Consuelo and they went toward the piano. Josefina turned to face her aunt.

"What a cocksure morsel she is!" Trini said to Raquel. "I hope she never loses that confidence in herself. She will need it where she is going!" She smiled when Josefina began to sing Violetta's long aria from *La Traviata*: "Wouldn't you know that would be her favorite?"

Raquel was pleased with what she saw on Trinidad's face as the girl sang.

"You have laid the foundation well, Raquel," she whispered."

"Her production — the keyboard of her voice — is as dependable as God. Now she needs to grow up and find out what the words mean."

She got up and put her arms around Josefina.

"Stop, darling! With my experience and your voice . . . what a Violetta we could turn out! But with my voice and your experience . . . I shudder to think of it! Vocally it is good, but you are like a little parrot singing by rote. If you are firm in your intention to sing professionally, stick to Mozart and develop a perfect legato. A coloratura without a legato is like a dancer who cannot walk. Get yourself all the education you can: you will need it to compete with the nest of vipers you will run into."

Josefina kept her eyes on her grandaunt's face.

'How greedily she is drinking it in,' Raquel thought. 'It is good for her to have one consuming desire. It will give her life direction.' There were times when Raquel wondered if it were wise to let Josefina consider the idea of being a professional singer. The life was full of pitfalls and temptations.

'But after all,' Raquel thought, 'what she gets into will depend on how good she is. If she is superlative, she will be indispensable. Second-raters, naturally, have to make more concessions. Every woman has to use her femininity for something. Why should it matter whether she uses it to get ahead in the world or to please one man?'

"I think you will do it," Trinidad said. "You resemble me in temperament. You have a good hard head on you . . . and you have the courage to fight back. Learn this from your unrepentant grandaunt — both of you — learn it while you are still very young: live so that Death cannot cheat you! Enjoy the things you like . . . and always save some money! The Golden Key is important. It opens all gates, even to my infinite relief, the Gate of Heaven!"

Raquel stared at Trinidad in admiration.

'I wish I were more like her,' she thought. 'A complete materialist, she still has a religion of sorts. She twists it to fit her comfortably the way she would stretch a pair of gloves that pinched her. Too much of a realist to think she can slip through the gate free, she is prepared to pay – as always – for the best seat in the house!'

TRINIDAD'S VISIT stiffened Raquel's resolve.

'I must risk Fausto's anger again,' she thought as she waited in the hall for the visit of Miss Elizabeth Carter. Fausto had been gone nearly two weeks, and Raquel hoped he would stay away a little longer.

Soledad let Miss Carter in. Raquel saw at once why Soledad walked beside the superintendent with such a respectful look in her eyes.

'It is because she is good . . . her goodness shines in her sweet, wrinkled face. It beams out from behind those unbecoming spectacles. No one can fool Cholly,' Raquel thought as she got up to take Miss Carter's hand.

"You are good to come," she said.

Miss Carter's old eyes looked at Raquel for a long second.

"I wish you had written sooner," she said.

Raquel pressed her friend's hand. 'For she is my friend,' she thought. 'Inside she is saying, "What has happened to you, Child?"'

"How beautiful your house is!" Miss Carter looked about her.

"I am glad you like it. It is cooler in the patio, so we will have our coffee there. The girls will be along later, but first I want to tell you about them. They haven't had much in the way of a foundation."

"Stop worrying about them! We'll fit them in somehow . . . the main thing is to get them out among modern, progressive people . . . congenial youngsters of their own age. Tell me about them."

"You see," Raquel said, "we live a very isolated life here. My husband has old-fashioned ideas about the family, so we don't see many people. I don't really know what my girls are supposed to know by your standards."

"Perhaps these will help." Miss Carter gave Raquel some printed sheets. "They are tests that will help us find out what group the girls belong in. Do they go to the convent all summer?"

"They always have," Raquel said.

"I was wondering if I sent you some textbooks, could you help them brush up a little before September? Language and a little Texas history? We find convent pupils good in arithmetic and spelling."

Raquel's heart overflowed with appreciation for the small, gray woman who was making things easy for her.

"I will notify the Sisters tomorrow," she said. "I can scarcely wait to begin. They speak very correct Spanish and their French is not bad, although not so fluent as their Spanish. One of them has a promising voice . . . she hopes to make music her career. The other plays excellent piano and has magical hands with plants. That is Consuelo, the one coming now . . . I want her to do something in the field of plant-breeding."

"You don't have to tell me which of those two is which! It's nice that their personalities are in such marked contrast: they make better company for each other."

"They get on remarkably well," Raquel said. She was proud of the way Josefina and Consuelo greeted Miss Carter. "One advantage of their isolated existence is that they have little chance to pick up mannerisms. When they enter a room, I think people will always ask, 'Who are they?' "

Raquel saw that Miss Carter understood adolescents. There were no direct questions, but she seemed to draw the girls out. In a few moments, Consuelo had gone for her finest plants and Josefina was bringing out music to show Miss Carter.

"Consuelo must begin elementary botany and plant-study. With the recent developments in citrus fruit and the planting of the groves, there is a future in fruit trees. You may be one of the pioneers, for all we know, Consuelo!"

"Oh, Miss Carter," Consuelo cried, "must we wait until September to begin?"

Raquel found the eagerness of the girls contagious; she was anxious to get her hands on the textbooks.

After the coffee was finished, Josefina sang for Miss Carter.

"She has an amazing voice," Miss Carter said. "Her musicianship is unusual in one so young. Would you mind telling me who taught her?"

"I did," Raquel said.

"So you taught her! Do you think it is fair to keep so much knowledge to yourself? You should be sharing it with the world."

"My husband would never consent to it."

"That is most regrettable. I doubt if there is anyone even in San Antonio who could teach a vocal production like that. You must have had the greatest of teachers."

"Yes. My father had a great taste about music and always insisted on the best."

"Then let us hope that the time will come when your husband will reconsider and you will be able to pass on your knowledge to others."

Because she liked Miss Carter so much, she had to answer truthfully.

"That is very unlikely, Miss Carter. But I have spent so much of my life among the Mexicans that I have come to think as they do, in terms of *mañana*. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? For the first time in fifteen years there is a kind of ferment inside me. I am beginning to wonder if complete submission and denial of self is a moral course."

"Keep right on thinking about it! You have to decide what things are worth to you . . . how much of yourself you are willing to spend for them. You have mastery over a great art. I feel it is your duty to use it, especially for the benefit of others. They will repay you well."

"I scarcely practice at all any more," Raquel said. "So many pregnancies . . . I am short of breath when I am carrying. But one never forgets the method . . . if the school is a solid one."

"You haven't forgotten."

Raquel smiled. "Miss Carter, you have opened a new, hopeful world to me. Just imagine the possibility of making money at something you love . . . like Consuelo with her plants!"

"My dear, that is the only way to make money: out of something you love. No one ever excels at anything that goes against the grain."

"I felt so badly when I thought of all the training I had had in my life, and yet to buy books for the girls, I thought I had to make use of needlework, the same handwork that supports the most illiterate Indian girl. I believe in the honesty and decency of working with my hands . . . it seems to me a holy thing. But I was throwing away the training that had been given to me to face the world with. I am very grateful to you, Miss Carter, even if I can never make use of my training."

"No skill or training is ever lost, my dear. If it does not show in one way, it will appear in another. But remember that the circumstances of your life will depend to some degree on you."

Raquel looked into the grave face.

"Yes, Miss Carter, I think they will. You have given me so much more than you know. I am not spiritually bankrupt any longer."

After supper Raquel sent the girls out for a walk with Soledad. She had to be alone to think. Wild, excited thoughts battered themselves against her brain. 'I shall not sleep for nights! All night long I'll be teaching people to sing, wondering if I am good enough, wondering if I shall get any pupils. How on earth could it be managed? Where would I teach them? Suppose I had to train a man's voice? No one could ever set foot in this house to take lessons!'

She smiled at her own anxiety. 'As Father would say, catching before hanging!'

She remembered her singing lessons in Durango. The maestro always came to the O'Riordan house. She did not think she would have the courage to walk into anyone's house to give a music lesson. It would be easier, more impersonal, she thought, if there were a public place available, a sort of neutral meeting-ground. In her reading she had come across descriptions of studios almost like gymnasiums. She remembered particularly the description of Lilli Lehmann's great room with the windows wide open in the cold, bracing air.

'I am like a child play-acting,' she thought. 'Visualizing myself as a great teacher . . . and I don't even know how to begin! I am sure I would not charge enough for fear of charging too much.'

The idea of teaching buzzed on and on in her head.

'Two people in as many days have admired Josefina's training . . . Trini is a severe and able critic. I am sure Miss Carter would be honest, even though she might not know so much about music as Trini does.'

Suddenly Raquel faced herself. 'Why am I putting these doubts and questions to myself? I know better than anyone else how much I know. Tetrazzini's own teacher gave me my production and the everlasting secret of all great tonal quality, the art of using the breath the way the violin virtuoso uses the bow. He taught me to keep the low notes high, and the high notes low . . . how we used to laugh over that paradox! But the high notes can never sound as though they were sitting on the back of the neck if they are kept low!'

She wandered on down the path of her memory. The arias she loved best came back to her.

'How deathlessly the great composers have recorded the anguish of the human heart!' she thought. 'They have captured joy, too . . . but to me it is no more than the carefree warbling of birds, charming but insignificant. The chirping and twittering of sparrows compared to the plaint of the nightingale. Violetta's farewell to the past is the cry that is wrung from the heart of every woman at some time in her life. Not a lament for what can be no more, but a cry of doubt: Were the things she experienced in the past real? Did they ever exist? I don't know why such thoughts come to me now . . . it is unlikely that they would interest the people I might teach. But it would be dishonest not to teach them a love-cry and a shriek of pain must both be mastered before there is art. They must learn that harsh, ugly notes have their place in dramatic singing . . . breathless, frightened cries are just as difficult to produce as beautiful, sustained tones – and equally important in the technical equipment of an artist!'

Raquel's mind soared with her thoughts. Just as suddenly as a bird falls from the sky when struck by a stone, her mind plummeted to earth: 'As though anyone here cared. If I had a pupil, it would be a fat, pimply girl who wanted to learn Tosti's "*Goodbye.*" I couldn't do it. Drawn-threadwork would be more honest.'

She felt old and heavy . . . heavy and very tired. For several days her hands and feet had been bothering her, tingling and swelled as though asleep.

'I don't drink enough water,' she thought.

She got up and went into her bedroom and took a glass of water. In the dim light she thought her face looked swollen. Her eyes were puffy. She put Florida Water on a handkerchief wrung out of ice water. As she lay down she noticed the size of her ankles and began to rub them.

'I live things too much,' she thought. 'In this whole world is there one thing I can treat casually and impersonally? I am burning up . . . perhaps I have a fever. I wish Cholly would come back!'

Raquel heard the front door open. 'Fausto is back!' she thought uneasily. 'Cholly and the girls would come in through the patio.' She heard his steps halting in the corridor as he looked around the house.

'I am too drowsy to get up,' she thought and lay still.

In a few minutes Fausto pushed her door open.

"What's the matter with you?" he said.

"I don't know . . . I feel very peculiar."

"It doesn't surprise me at all . . . you have been acting strangely, Raquel. These notions of yours . . . they've got to stop and that's all there is to it!"

Raquel was glad she had the handkerchief over her eyes.

'He can't see how he gets to me,' she thought, ashamed of her easy tears. She heard him sit down in her rocker and pull his boots off.

"Do you mind sleeping in your own room, Fausto?"

For several seconds he did not speak.

"Sit up," he said at last. "Take that rag off your eyes and look at me."

Raquel removed the hankerchief, but did not sit up.

"You belong to me." Fausto's voice was cold. "So long as you are under my roof, I can do what I want with you. We've been as happy as any two people ever are and I see no sense in trying to destroy our life together. I want you to behave yourself properly, as you have always done. You make things very difficult for me, Raquel, when you start meddling in my affairs and try to be something you are not. Forget your schemes . . . and kiss me."

"I don't want to kiss you. Something is wrong with my baby."

"You women are all alike . . . you don't want children, any of you."

Raquel cringed, unable to separate the dull mounting ache in her body from the pain Fausto inflicted.

"If you want to save this one, Fausto, you had better see about getting a doctor."

Fausto's face twisted.

"You would like that, wouldn't you? You would actually submit to having a man examine your body the way he would a prostitute in one of the guaranteed brothels. Don't let me hear such filth in my house. You have always managed with the midwife. Send for her, if there is really anything wrong with you. There is no reason for you to lose one child after another, unless you are trying to!"

Raquel sat up, her arms around her belly. She forgot the pain, the premonitory, disappointing pangs she knew so well. For a long time she sat looking at her husband's contorted face, feeling nothing. Nothing at all: 'If someone placed a red-hot poker on me, I could not feel it. It would not even make a mark . . . this is what dying really is.' She scarcely recognized her voice when it came between her dry lips.

"This time you've gone too far, Fausto. You alone are responsible for the loss of the babies. Your bigotry and ignorance force them to be still-born. You don't love anyone but yourself. You shut me out of your life completely except when you want me in bed."

Fausto's face was white. "Have you no respect for yourself?"

"A great deal, Fausto . . . and newly acquired!"

Fausto started to speak, but she stopped him.

"I am ashamed of the abject creature – something a little less than human – that you turned me into. I want something better and you have given it to me: my baby won't be born alive, but you have given me something in his place! The right and the courage to belong to myself and the children I already have."

He rose and came to the bedside. His voice was hoarse.

"I can only stand so much, Raquel. I have never struck a woman . . ."

The bruising ache that was to mean the end of Raquel's fruitless reproduction for thirteen years bore down upon her and made her struggle for breath.

"I know you haven't," she looked up at him. "You run away instead. You run because you can't bear what you see reflected in a woman's face. I don't think the ranch will be far enough this time, Fausto. For no matter where you run, you have to take yourself along."

Raquel gestured toward his boots on the floor. Silently he picked them up and left the room. She sat staring straight in front of her; a crazy thought came through the pain: 'Is there anything more pathetic than a man in his stocking-feet?'

Raquel did not know how long Soledad had been sitting beside her. The air coming through the open window smelled late. Toncha la Negra, the midwife, sat on the foot of the bed. Raquel tried to raise her head and Soledad leaned over her instantly.

"You fainted," she said.

Raquel felt drowsy and weak.

"What happened?" she asked.

"It's dead," the midwife said. "I put a rag in to make it come out. Do you feel the pains starting?"

Raquel moved her head.

"The pains have stopped. In all the other times, I never felt like this. I feel as though red ants were crawling all over me."

Soledad placed a wet cloth on her forehead and she saw how white the woman's face was in the dim glow of the night-light.

Toncha la Negra's beady eyes stared at her. "I put the scissors between the mattress to cut the pain."

Raquel drowsed into stuporous quiet. Everything seemed too big . . . her hands and feet seemed so big she could not lift them.

"My fingers are too fat," she moaned. "When I touch them together they feel as big as a watermelon."

Soledad was beside her trying to force a spoonful of brandy and chopped ice between her lips.

For what seemed many hours she lay feeling as though she were bound hand and foot. Her tongue was heavy and she could not say what she wanted to. When Soledad spoke to her, it seemed as though she was off at a great distance. In the cool dawn, she knew she must be delirious, for she was certain that Trinidad Hidalgo was holding her hand.

"Just a few minutes more, Raquel . . . he'll be here." It was Trinidad's voice, softer than Raquel had ever heard it. She turned her head away . . . she did not want Fausto near her.

"No! No!" she muttered.

"You'll be glad he came, dear. Don't try to talk." Trinidad was stroking her hand.

'I must really be dying,' Raquel thought. 'They want me to see him before . . . and I must forgive him. He has to look after the girls.'

Someone came into the room.

'How different Fausto looks,' Raquel thought. 'That is because I am so sick. His hair is gray and he looks stocky and odd to me.' But the hands were not Fausto's. At the gentle, exploring touch she tried to open her eyes wider, to make them focus clearly. She felt a cool breeze on her body and knew no shame. A new voice was speaking. A rich voice that should have been warm and free, but was cold and tight with suppressed rage.

"I'll have to risk it," the voice said. "I hope to God the infection hasn't gone too far."

Gradually Raquel felt herself floating. She imagined there was something on her nose, but it was only the sickness. She felt beautifully cool all over. 'Just the way I feel,' she thought, 'when I wake up early after a good night's rest. Dying isn't bad at all.'

For many long, unnatural days and nights Raquel lay in her darkened bedroom.

Soledad, the tireless, never left her side. Through her deep slumber, Raquel could sense the comfort of her presence. From time to time she tried to rouse herself. Things were happening around her, but she did not have strength enough to pull herself all the way out of the chasm of her sleep. Late one June afternoon, when the shadows spread their long fingers over the carpet, she opened her eyes and knew where she was. She looked at Soledad and smiled. The woman's tired face drew into stern lines to hold back her tears.

"We almost lost you," she said. She moved the lustrous braids of Raquel's hair so they would not be hot on her neck.

Raquel saw the votive lights on the small altar facing her bed. Something in the resigned attitude of the Blessed Virgin reached her . . . the unprotesting slope of the shoulders seemed to say to her that suffering was not in vain.

"She has been good to me," Raquel said.

Soledad looked at the statue and nodded.

"But all the same, I am making a novena for that man!" Raquel looked at her. "The doctor. The things he knows! The torture our women endure on account of the filthy-minded jealousy of the men! I could stand the lot of them up against a brick wall and shoot them."

"How did he get in?"

"Doña Trini brought him. He took away the dead thing and saved your life. You were getting blood-poisoning."

"Where is Fausto?"

Soledad shrugged. "We sent word to the ranch, but he has not shown his face."

Raquel began exploring with her senses. She felt no pain, just weariness and lassitude. As she became more accustomed to sensation, she felt a great emptiness. 'I feel as though I were newly born,' she said. Soledad brought a tall glass of beaten egg-white and orange juice. Raquel found herself drinking it greedily. Before she had finished, Fernando appeared in the doorway. He turned to someone behind him:

"Come in, Doctor," he said.

Raquel stared at the man in the door . . . he seemed very familiar to her, but she knew she had never seen him before. He stared at her in return as he came near the bed.

"You have your eyes open at last!" he said. "I didn't know they would be blue." He sat down in the chair Soledad placed for him and took Raquel's wrist in his hand. "Stronger today!"

Raquel felt like an infant. 'I should feel strange with this man, but how can I after he saved my life?

I want to thank him, but all I can do is lie here and smile like an imbecile.'

"Don't try to talk," he said. "You've done enough for one day. When you are quite strong again, you and I are going to have a talk."

Raquel nodded and caught herself slipping off to sleep. Her thoughts were hazy, but she knew why she could sleep again. 'It is because I know now that there is help in the world. Help for everything,' she thought. 'I could have had the others if someone had brought a kind, wise man like this . . . someone who can make it easier to be a woman.'

By the last of June, Raquel was able to be up and around. She still enjoyed the feeling she had noticed on the afternoon she recovered consciousness: a feeling of lightness and emptiness.

'All the dregs of misery and illness are gone out of me,' she thought. She felt serene and strong. Occasionally she thought of the scene Fausto would make when he came home. In her new-found well-being she thought: 'He will just have to make a scene!' Her own indifference surprised her. 'If I miss the road now, there will never be any turning back. My life has been like a long, narrow corridor leading to a cell. As I ran faster and faster toward the cell, the corridor grew more narrow at every step . . . then – almost at the end – I saw that the cell was a grave. Luckily I found out before the corridor became too narrow to turn around in.'

Soledad came into the room.

"Doña Trini is in the parlor with Doctor MacAllister."

Trinidad Hidalgo took charge as soon as Raquel came in.

"I opened my fast mouth again, Raquel," she said. "I told the doctor that you and the girls should go to my house at the Point for the season. Before I go back to Washington, I want to be sure you are going to have a rest for the summer – and some peace of mind. Promise me you'll go."

Raquel looked at the doctor.

"It would be best, Señora. I am glad your aunt is here . . ."

"Please speak out, Doctor MacAllister, and say whatever is on your mind," Raquel said.

"You must not get pregnant again."

"I doubt that I shall," she said.

"There is no room for doubt in your case," Doctor MacAllister said. "If you get pregnant again, I shall have your husband indicted for murder."

'Even Trini is stunned,' Raquel thought, as she stared at the man and woman in front of her.

"I was going to keep away from him anyway," she said.

"I don't know exactly what your religious views are," the doctor began, "But in a case like yours, a matter of life and death . . . I am justified in informing . . ."

"There is no need," Raquel said. "I do not need my religion to tell me that such a union, even freed from its natural consequences, is union on its lowest level. When there is nothing left but that, the marriage is over."

"Nonsense!" Trinidad snapped. "I hope you are not going to be silly, Raquel. You are a young, passionate woman. At your age that's all that matters in life!"

Raquel was silent for a long time. At last she spoke. "It may have been all that mattered to you, Tía. I am not sure I can be strong enough, but I can try. It is the only way for me. I have known for a long time that love on Fausto's terms was taking a mortal usury out of me."

Doctor MacAllister stared hard at her. "You don't know what you're letting yourself in for."

"I know better than anyone," Raquel said. "I have to pay, and I have to pay in my own money. It will be bitter coin. I will go to the Point on Monday, Trini."

She left them and went to her room. She sat down to be alone with the new and disturbing thought of being in control. She knew three months at the seaside would be good for her, and for the girls.

'I don't know what we will live on; all I know is that we must go. Fausto would not help me if he could. Somewhere in this desk is the old Hidalgo pass for the railroad. It must still be here.' She found the pass in a stamp box and looked at it. 'Never used in this generation! Even a few weeks to myself will make the break with Fausto easier.' She rang for Soledad.

"We are going to Doña Trini's house at Point Isabel for the summer."

"Good."

Raquel smiled. "I don't know how good it is . . . I'll accept the house from her, but how are we going to eat after we get there?"

"Leave that to me," Soledad said. "When are we going?"

"Monday. Go for the key tonight. And keep this pass . . . I might lose it."

Raquel looked up and saw Fausto standing in the door of her bedroom. She knew the depth of his rage because he had come in so silently.

"Come in, Fausto," she said.

He never looked at Raquel, but stared at Soledad's iron cot standing beside Raquel's bed. No one spoke. After a few moments he turned his back on the women and walked away.

Soledad looked at Raquel, apprehension written on her face.

"I am not Hercules, trying to run a furlong in a breath," Raquel said. "One step at a time. The cot stays."

ALL DAY SUNDAY a sense of conspiracy filled the house. From her lounge in the patio where she was sewing, Raquel saw how Fernando eyed Soledad. She stood under the big fig tree ironing. Every time she picked up a flatiron from the charcoal furnace and spat on it to test it, Soledad turned and looked at Fernando defiantly. It was as though she spat on him.

Raquel saw Fernando prepare a tray to carry to Fausto's room. She was glad that he was keeping out of sight.

Fernando passed close to Soledad with the tray. "Women clatter like cowbells until you really want to find out something," he muttered.

Soledad silently finished folding the clothes and placing them in a large wicker trunk lined with tissue paper. She put sprays of reseda in with the clothes and sprinkled them with dry seeds stripped from the sweet lavender tree in the corner.

"Off on a honeymoon, Old One?" Fernando asked on his way back.

"Not with you, Capon! Out of my way . . . I have the chocolate to make."

"At this hour? And you made some only day before yesterday! At least leave my kitchen clean . . . I don't want to spend half the night cleaning up after you when I get back from the ice plant."

Soledad ignored him and put away her irons. Raquel saw her go into the kitchen. She knew what Soledad was up to when she saw her take the keys to the storeroom out of the lock and drop them in the pocket of her black sateen apron.

Consuelo and Josefina came into the patio.

"I was just going after you," Soledad said. "When Fernando goes out the gate, run upstairs and bring down the big suitcase."

Raquel got up to watch Soledad prepare the chocolate. She grated a large bowlful of rough, gritty chocolate and added part of a vanilla bean. Then she stirred in several pounds of sugar and mixed it to a paste with water. Raquel watched her beat a dozen eggs to a thick froth.

"Salt," Soledad said to the girls. "And don't let the milk boil over." She took the milk from the stove and stirred it into the chocolate mixture.

"Stand here and stir this till it thickens, Consuelo . . . don't let it burn or you'll be looking for the camphor ice yourself."

She took the keys from her pocket and went to the storeroom. "Bring the suitcase, Josefina, and keep an eye out for Long Nose."

Raquel smiled as she watched the girls' delight in raiding Fernando's domain. She moved closer to the door to see what they were doing. Soledad was filling stout canvas bags with staples.

"*Garbanzos*," she muttered, "ten pounds of them . . .

last all summer. *Frijoles.* Sugar. Coffee to wake us up . . . " She measured the green beans from the hundred-pound bag of coffee on the floor and fluffed up the top of the sack so that Fernando would not notice how much was missing.

She turned to Raquel. "I'll think for today . . . let God think for tomorrow!"

"The chocolate is thick," Consuelo said.

Soledad looked at it and pulled it off the fire to cool.

"Shall I put the eggs in now?" Consuelo asked.

"What do you want? Scrambled eggs? Wait until it is cool."

"Watch the door," Soledad said to Raquel. "He's very nosy and there is no need of an argument."

She took a large knife and cut off several yard-long strips of smoked Mexican sausage. She wrapped them in newspaper and put them into the suitcase along with a net bag full of dried chile. She added a long braid of onions and one of garlic. The suitcase was bulging. Soledad took a last look around the pantry and picked up a large goat's-milk cheese; she smiled at Raquel.

"We'll fit it in somehow! Better a shameless eating than a shameless leaving."

The front door slammed.

"They've both gone," Raquel said.

"Now we have the place to ourselves," Soledad said. "I have to finish the chocolate before I do anything else." She poured the cool chocolate over the beaten eggs and returned it to the fire for a few seconds. Then she poured the thick mass into two large tin pans to harden. Over the top she grated bits of stick cinnamon.

"By morning I can cut this into squares and pack it. One square to a cup of boiling water, a good whisking with my wooden chocolate beater . . . rich and good! My family will not do without their milk and eggs. Not while I have the cunning of the poor."

"You have hands for everything, Cholly," Raquel said. "I have to go and look around for something to wear on the train. There will be American ladies on it and they don't travel in wrappers."

"That's so," Soledad rubbed her chin. "They use the shirtwaist. What about the black faille dinner gown from your trousseau?"

"In the daytime? It's too small, anyway."

"Only the skirt, I meant. With one of your fancy batiste sacques tucked in, it would be just what the ladies wear."

They went to her bedroom. Soledad got the rich silk dress out of the wardrobe and examined it. She ripped the skirt from the waistband and tried it on Raquel.

"I can take out some of the gores and it will be just the thing." The skirt fit Raquel better than she expected it would.

"I'll wear my black lace mantilla."

"No, Niña . . . the American ladies wear hats. You must too."

"But I haven't got one, Cholly. I haven't had any use for one in years."

"You have now!" Soledad muttered.

She left the room and returned in a few minutes with a black Milan straw hat. The flaring brim turned up at one side and was held in place by a black grosgrain bow. Raquel turned the hat in her hands and looked at the tiny mirror sewed into the lining.

"Where did you get this? The label says Reboux. There is nothing like this in Brownsville or even in San Antonio."

"Doña Trini traded it to Gertrudis, the lace-seller, for a dozen lace handkerchiefs. What use has an old crone like Gertrudis for a hat?"

Raquel blushed for Trinidad's close dealing.

"Don't blush. I didn't take it for nothing. It made me sad to think you had no hat, just in case . . . "

"Just in case what, Cholly?"

"Just in case! It's hope that keeps us all going, like the bit of sugar-cane dangled in front of the balky mule's nose."

"We haven't much but hope, Cholly. This is a thin start. But I'm not going to balk, like your mule. An open fight is better than waiting, always waiting. Waiting to see how Fausto is going to take things! It is worse than walking on eggs."

Soledad waved her hand in a circular motion: "And tomorrow morning the eggs are going to get beaten!"

"What time does the train go?"

"Seven."

"The man will be on time with the hack?"

"Without fail! He wanted his money in advance when he found out it was for us, but I reminded him that Doña Trini had a mortgage on his rig. He promised quickly enough then."

"When I send for Fausto, get the girls and the luggage into the hack at once. Try to keep the bundles out of sight. I don't want any scandal in the street."

"That's understood. I hope he is in a better mood by morning."

Raquel shrugged. "You only die once." She took up Pascal's *Pensées* and sat down in her rocker to read.

Soledad slipped in and out of the room, shadow-like, always with bundles under her apron. She opened the wardrobe and put Raquel's jewel case in the bodice of her dress. Raquel looked up and saw Soledad shaking her fist at Saint Anthony on the little altar.

"You help us tomorrow," she muttered, "and you'll get a big fat candle. Otherwise, you'll hang head-first down the well for three days again."

Josefina stuck her head in the door. "Who are you talking to?"

"Myself!" Soledad said. "Go to bed. I want the two of you up and dressed at dawn. I'm going to bed as soon as I rub your mother's back . . . she has a hard day ahead of her."

"Is Cholly going to sleep in your room tonight, Mama?"

"You see her cot by my bed, don't you?"

Josefina sighed. "How sad it is to be without love! Especially at night!"

"Santa Virgen de Guadalupe!" Soledad shouted. "Won't you ever learn? Can't you see all this misery, all this torment is on account of love? Any more of that talk and I'll give you a big dose of salts in the morning."

* * *

AT HALF-PAST FIVE the next morning, Soledad brought Raquel's coffee and helped her dress.

"Do you remember where you put my corset, Cholly?"

"Corset?" Soledad's mouth hung open.

Raquel went through the motion of pulling laces. Soledad stared at her mistress over her shoulder as she walked toward the wardrobe and found Raquel's corset wrapped in tissue paper.

Silently Soledad dressed her in the lacy white blouse and black silk skirt. She helped her on with the slender black vici kid pumps. Then she combed her hair, arranging it in a low knot on the back of her neck. She touched Raquel's hand by accident. Raquel saw her startled face in the mirror:

"Yes. They are like ice. I am only calm on the outside."

Raquel put on vanishing cream and powdered her face. She brushed her eyebrows and eyelashes with a little brush dipped in brilliantine. She looked herself over carefully in the mirror. Her hands trembled slightly at the unaccustomed ritual of putting on a hat. There was no doubt that the hat was becoming to her, but still she was not satisfied. She opened a drawer and took out a tiny pot of kohl, twirled the end of an orange-stick in the dark cream and deepened the color of the mole on her left cheek. Her face was not right yet. She picked up a doll's china teacup full of lip-rouge and dipped the end of her little finger into it. Then she spoke to Soledad's reflection in the mirror.

"When a woman is bathed, dressed, and has a little color on her lips — she is ready to face anything! Come what will!"

What Raquel saw in her mirror was reassuring — and it needed to be.

"Tell Fausto I wish to speak to him here in my room." The assurance was gone from her voice. It was hoarse with apprehension. Soledad hastily picked up her own black head-shawl from her cot and went to deliver the message.

A few minutes later, Raquel crossed herself sketchily as she heard the click of Fausto's boot heels on the tiles. She opened the door before he could knock. For a long moment he said nothing at all — just looked her up and down. His face was drained of color.

"Why the masquerade?" he said finally.

"Sarcasm is quite useless, Fausto." Raquel was surprised at the calmness of her voice. "I sent for you to tell you that I am taking the girls and Cholly to spend the summer in Trini's house at the Point."

"Are you out of your mind?" Fausto said. "All I hear from you these days is one mad project after another . . . you haven't even consulted me!"

"How could I consult you when you haven't spoken a word to me in weeks?"

Fausto's color began to return as anger replaced shock.

"My Aunt Trini! I might have known she was up to something! Trinidad Hidalgo is nothing more nor less than a meddling old bitch who should have been dead ten years ago!"

Raquel shrugged. "I have heard your opinion of your aunt before, at greater length – and much more colorfully expressed."

Fausto stared as though he had not heard her correctly.

"You're very brave all of a sudden," he said. "Boldness doesn't become you any more than that ridiculous hat does!"

"I'm sorry you don't like it. It's really quite a good hat." Raquel's tone was amiable.

"Take it off this minute!" Fausto took a step toward her.

Raquel shook her head. "No, Fausto. The carriage is waiting."

"You're not going anywhere! You are going to stay right in this house like a respectable woman!" He took hold of her arms.

"Take your hands off me, Fausto, before you regret it!"

Raquel had no idea what she would do if he did not obey her. Something in her voice reached him, for he loosed his hold on her. His voice was lower when he spoke.

"Give up this lunacy, Raquel. The Point is messy and dirty and stinks of fish. Those shacks are miserably hot. No one goes there but whores and soldiers from the Fort."

Raquel's voice was flat. "You are detaining me," she said.

Fausto's expression convinced Raquel that if he did not strike her then, he never would. For an eternity he glared into her face, and she stared back at him. When she had stared long enough to convince herself that he could not make her lower her gaze, she stepped around him and walked straight down the hall and out the front door. She saw Soledad and the girls peering out between the curtains of the hack. She did not hasten her pace even at their frantic gestures. She got in and Soledad told the driver to start. All at once Raquel found herself trembling.

"I have forgotten my purse!" She began to laugh hysterically. "What's the difference? There was nothing in it!"

* * *

THE COTTAGE at Point Isabel sat up on high stilts close to the edge of the ocean. The space between the stilts and the ground was covered with green wooden latticework. Across the front there was a gallery with willow chairs and tables on it. The yard was nothing but sand and oyster shells. A smell of tar, rotten rope, and gasoline from the motor launches filled the air. Bamboo fishpoles and flounder spears stood in one corner of the gallery. Crab baskets and fishing seines hung against the lattice fence.

The path to the steps was made of crushed oyster shells. Because Raquel Hidalgo had lived in the house a few weeks, sea beans and sand verbena edged the path and hung down from wooden boxes on the porch.

Raquel came down the steps quickly. She was wearing a pair of canvas tennis shoes Trinidad had left in her clothes closet. Above her white linen skirt she wore a middy blouse that belonged to one of her daughters. A large Mexican hat was perched on the back of her head. A red cord under her chin held the hat in place. Her white skin was tanned to a warm ivory and her expression was serene.

"It must be about four," she said to Soledad behind her with the fishpoles. “They are beginning to jump.”

The sea was by turns green and leaden gray. Fish jumping to the surface made bubbles that plopped encouragingly.

“I hope you get another redfish,” Soledad said.

The rotten planks in the pier were so wide apart in places that sometimes the women had to make it across on their hands and knees. When they reached the end of the pier, they sat down, their legs dangling over the side. Soledad took minnows from a tin can and baited the hooks. The worst of the heat was over and the gentle breeze of the Mexican Gulf started to whisper. It whispered of youth, good health, smoke fires, and someone waiting at home. A fisherman came by with a load of shrimp in a little green boat. He smiled and waved.

“It’s nice here,” Raquel said, as she waved back.

“Anyone could live to be a hundred this way,” Soledad agreed. “Fresh air, freedom from nerves, lots of sleep . . . we haven’t a cent and we don’t even need much food!”

“I am not worried,” Raquel said. “Ever since I walked by him in that hall, I have had a sense of adequacy, a feeling of not being worried by anything.”

“Who has slept, has eaten.” Soledad quoted the proverb dear to privacy-loving Spaniards.

Raquel’s attention was on her fishing pole that pulled down suddenly in a hard curve.

“Hold the pole,” she said. “It’s a big one!” She pulled up the line slowly, hand over hand, breathing almost as rapidly as the glittering fish that wriggled on her hook. Raquel handed the redfish over to Soledad so that she could unhook it.

"I can never do that job myself," she said.

"Shall I bait the hook again?" Soledad asked as she put a bit of twine through the fish's gills.

"There is no use taking more than we need. We have no ice," Raquel said. "Let us just watch the sun as it sets."

Raquel heard leaping footsteps behind her and turned to see who could navigate the perilous planks at such speed. Consuelo and Josefina came up carrying a net full of stone crabs.

"Now we know how!" Josefina panted. "At first we didn't catch anything, but now we lie on our stomachs on the small wharf and hang the cords down and wait for the crabs to bite."

"I use the basket," Consuelo said. She had a box-shaped basket of wire mesh in her hand. The four sides dropped down when the strings were loosened. When the crabs crawled in after the bait, the hand that held the strings pulled them up and closed the walls of the trap.

"I don't need that!" Josefina boasted. "I just tie a piece of bacon onto the end of the string and haul it up when the crabs sink their teeth into it!"

"Crabs have no teeth. And they may drop back into the water before you can hoist them up!" Consuelo argued.

"Of course!" Josefina said. "But my way is more exciting."

"Aren't you starving?" Soledad asked. "We are going in right away to start supper."

"There's a man at Champion's store who gives a nickel apiece for stone crabs," Consuelo said. "Is it all right, Mama?"

"I don't know why not," Raquel said, "If you don't want to eat them."

"There are plenty to eat, too. I'm going to buy sweet bread . . . gingerbread pigs for the coffee."

For a moment Raquel felt embarrassed. The girls should buy candy or something for themselves. Then her mind got the better of her heart.

'I am crippling them already,' she thought. 'Depriving them of the right to contribute something to the family. Aloud she said, "Run along, and drive a hard bargain."

The girls ran on ahead. Soledad and Raquel left the dock and started up the beach to the cottage. On the veranda of the hotel, rows of white-clad matrons rocked and gossiped.

"What a life they have!" Soledad said.

"I wouldn't change with them for anything in the world," Raquel said. "I had fifteen years of living in cotton wool, like a broody hen, a sort of mystic incubator. Waiting — always waiting. Waiting like a barometer or a sensitive plant to see what kind of mood Fausto would be in. Cautious and fearful, weighing every word, never knowing in which direction he would jump, or what caprice would dominate him next! Not for me, Woman! I love this spare, frugal life. Here we have the greatest luxury in the world: peace."

"And later, when your comb starts getting red again?"

Raquel smiled faintly at being compared to a fowl.

"That's when I'll have to pay up. But for the bliss of waking up without my heart pounding against my ribs, the joy of being able to say and do what I please, and the comfort of knowing I am not going through another useless pregnancy – sleeping alone isn't much of a price!"

Soledad looked at her out of the corner of her eye.

"It's true," Raquel said. "I know now why nuns are so contented. There comes a time when each of us feels the need to be, for a little while anyway, not a wife or a mother, just a plain human being."

"And if you had known all those other times that your life was in danger?"

Raquel shook her head in a puzzled way.

"It's a funny thing: the same set of happenings might have taken place at another time and not have changed me. Something in you must be ready for the change, or it cannot take place. What puzzles me is that whatever I felt for Fausto has not diminished. It's just that I love being alive more than I love having him in bed with me."

"That business tapers off in the course of nature, I know," Soledad said gravely. "But at your age . . . "

"You change suddenly, Cholly, when your life has been almost snuffed out. Everything takes on a different size and value, like familiar furniture seen by firelight. What you thought was big, looks little: husband, children, and home become unimportant. You realize you could live without them if you had to. And little absurd things take on importance . . . little things like wanting to ride the trolley and wanting to see the moving pictures once before you die."

Raquel looked at Soledad's face, immobile as a woodcarving.

"When I lay there with the life blood seeping out of me, I thought of how often I heard people say, 'If my love, or my children, or my home were taken from me, I could not live!' It isn't true. Wanting to live is like swallowing; you have to whether you want to or not. A signal flashes, like the lamp on a toll bridge, warning you that there will be a price. And when you are really about to die, the price never seems too high."

Soledad wiped her eyes with the corner of her shawl.

"Remember," Raquel went on, "when Sarita Cruz was combing her hair near the lamp and the celluloid comb exploded in her face? She threatened to commit suicide because she didn't want to live disfigured. She didn't kill herself. Her beauty was her price. The price was not too high because the blind children at the asylum think she is beautiful."

"It takes twenty years off my age to hear you speak like that," Soledad said. "Always you have thought for every living creature but yourself. Your quick sympathy and compassion rush out and blind you even to your own safety. When you were a child, I prayed to the Virgin to make you less loving-hearted and tender. Even as a baby you gave too much of yourself. You held out your heart in your little fat hands offering it like a flower to everyone. It's time you thought for yourself – at last."

Raquel shrugged gently. "It does something to you, that verdict. The feeling of floating. No pain – just the cold of nothingness."

Soledad shuddered.

"That's how it feels, Cholly. It seems so easy, why resist? But all the time you know it isn't what you want . . . you can't give in. Even the futility of your own life is better than that cool emptiness. Keeping alive is all that matters . . . at any price!"

Soledad and Raquel walked along slowly, immersed in their thoughts, until they came to the foot of the cottage steps. The thought came to Raquel that not since her father's death had she spoken so freely to anyone. Suddenly she looked up and saw Fernando sitting on the steps puffing a cigarette. Soledad saw him too.

"The minnow before the whale," she muttered. "What brings you here, Bird of Ill Omen?"

"See, Doña Raquel, how she cannot contain herself for joy at the sight of me? You would think the seaside might have sweetened her disposition . . . "

"No fighting, please," Raquel smiled. "How are things in town?"

"Nothing new, Señora. But you look well. Completely recovered, thank God! Your cheeks have the color of those little April roses . . . "

"Did you come all the way down here to recite the words of a street ballad?" Soledad demanded.

"Well . . ." Fernando twisted his hat in his hands and addressed Raquel, "Don Fausto gave me permission to come for a day or two. He is at the ranch and the house is like a tomb! So lonely, so quiet without this panther!" He glared at Soledad. "I brought you a few little oddments . . . "

"We don't want anything from you!" Soledad's tone was harsh. "Presents always cost more than purchases." She picked up the large basket from which protruded the yellow legs of two fowls, and half a freshly butchered young goat.

"Give Fernando a cup of coffee, Cholly, and bring me one to the porch, please. It was thoughtful of you to bring the things, Fernando." Raquel watched the pair go to the kitchen, Soledad marching Fernando in front of her.

'She has him at the point of an imaginary gun. She knows his pinches too well to walk ahead of him!' She shook her head and smiled as she washed her hands in the big china bowl on the washstand. How could they fight, she wondered, so bitterly and so unflaggingly year after year. Actually they worked toward a common goal: the only thought in their heads was to keep face for those whom they loved better than their own eyesight.

'They are like a couple who have been married for years,' Raquel thought. 'They miss each other for no other reason than to have someone to fight with.' The sadness of the thought struck her. 'That is all that too many couples have in common. Even so, it is more than we had. What we had, with companionship, would have been a good thing – a holy thing. When our bodies made the only contact, it was vicious. But it takes time to find that out. Time to think is what we need. Is Fausto thinking, I wonder? I hope he is.'

For the first time since she left his house, Raquel knew with her whole intelligence that she could not go back to Fausto Hidalgo.

* * *

FERNANDO’S VISIT made Raquel think. She was sure Fausto had sent him to see what was going on at the seashore. She knew he would come down before long to bully her into returning.

‘I am glad he isn’t here now,’ she thought. ‘The rest, the sun and the sea, have made me vigorous as a camellia tree. I would have a difficult time with him now.’

The girls ran up the path and cleared the steps two at a time:

“We met a girl!” Josefina panted.

“The Yanqui from the convent,” Consuelo said.

“Is that why you had to run like the Devil from holy water?” Soledad said.

“We came for permission,” Josefina said.

“To do what?” Raquel asked.

“She doesn’t believe I can sing!” – she tossed her head. “I’ll show that whale face! Consuelo said we better ask your permission.”

“Why didn’t you just sing?” Raquel said.

“She lives in the hotel with her mother and father. There is a piano in the sitting room. They want us to come inside where the mother and father can hear too.”

“Who are they?” Raquel asked.

"You know, Mama!" Consuelo said. "The one who tells such lies about her father and the grapefruit trees . . . she says he has thousands of them. They come from Boston and her ears are not pierced."

"How do you know she lies? You heard what Miss Carter said about the citrus fruit . . . maybe it is so. Do you want to sing, Josefina?" Raquel looked at the haughty face of her daughter.

"Of course!" she said. "I always want to sing. We came to ask permission because they will keep us very late. They won't want me to stop."

"Spoken with all the modesty of the true artist! I hope the piano isn't too terrible."

Raquel knew there was no need to tell Josefina to do her best. 'She will always answer every challenge life throws down to her,' she thought. 'How proud Consuelo is of her brazen sister!'

"Come here till I tie those sashes," Soledad said.

She tied the sashes to her taste, the girls squirming and wriggling with impatience. How many times had the hems been let down on those white voile dresses? Raquel wondered. They were still beautiful and becoming to the girls . . . fine silky white voile covered with Soledad's exquisite embroidery.

'They have the simplicity of young princesses,' Raquel thought as they raced down the steps. They were beginning to run and leap, sometimes they even shouted – and Raquel was glad.

"This is the thing I have hoped for," she said to Soledad. "I want them to be invited out, to see how other people live. They will learn to mingle with strangers freely and without embarrassment."

"Josefina will be embarrassed when frogs sprout hairs," Soledad said.

Raquel smiled. "I know what you mean. But she will lose that chip on her shoulder . . . a little success and a chance to show off will sweeten her a lot. Consuelo doesn't need it; her dignity and kindness will carry her through anything. All they need is experience . . . it doesn't even matter too much what kind of people they meet. The real harm is in isolation."

Raquel looked out at the sea and watched the wake of the moonlight. The moon traveled fast at this season of the year, she thought. Over the water the sky seemed low — low and full of stars.

'Close enough to reach up and gather them like flowers,' she thought. 'If I could, I would take them and tie them in the braids of my daughters' hair as country girls tie fireflies in theirs.' Raquel was surprised at her own emotion.

'I had not known I was such a mother-person,' she thought. Pride swelled in her as she thought of her children, their lovely bodies, delicate ankles, and fine straight legs. 'It's an odd feeling when you look up one day and see a piece of yourself walking around. In a few years they will be the age I was when I married Fausto.' Her mind raced back over the years. 'I hope it will be different for them, but for myself . . . I would not change one moment of the good nor one moment of the bad . . . even the bad has been richly formative for me. Without what went before, I would not be here now.'

The moon was low when Soledad spoke: "Shall I go for them?"

"No. I have been sitting here thinking about it. That is what Fausto would do. We must not embarrass them with our ways in front of their American friends."

Before she finished speaking, Raquel heard the voices of the girls coming up the road. They were chattering excitedly. In a few moments they were on the porch.

"We had ice cream!" Josefina said.

"How was the music?" Raquel asked.

"It was wonderful!" Consuelo's voice was rapture itself. "Even the father knows the arias! The mother played the piano and it was beautiful. She studied in France with a man named Philipp. You would love her, Mama! She has the most gentle ways and is thin like a paper doll."

"Tell about me!" Josefina said.

"They couldn't believe what they were hearing," Consuelo said. "She said Josefina's technique was pure magic. She wants you to teach Myra . . . Myra Banker."

"Consuelo was going to say you never taught anyone but us, so I spoke very fast and said everyone wanted you to teach, even the superintendent of schools."

Raquel smiled. "That was only half a lie! What did the lady say . . . Mrs. Banker?"

"She said she understood how they would. She gives lessons. In a studio. And her husband knows about it. They are rich, too. American men must be very odd, Mama."

"I think they must be very nice, Josefina."

"When we go back to Brownsville," Consuelo said, "Mr. Banker said he would let me see the grove of fruit trees. He even said he would come for us in an automobile."

"Well, it's true," Josefina said. "They drove down here in one. I saw them."

"You know, Mama, all those things she said at the convent were true," Consuelo said. "I thought they were lies because I was ignorant. I am glad to find out things. I like Myra Banker very much."

The next morning Raquel was kneeling on the walk pinching back the sand verbena when she heard the gate open. A slender, fragile woman came up the path. Her voice was light and high:

"I am Abby Banker," she said.

"Thank you for entertaining my girls." Raquel rose.

"Thank me! We are in their debt."

"Come to the porch and sit down." Raquel led the way and dropped her gloves on a table. "Will you take something? A cup of coffee . . . I haven't had my second coffee yet."

Mrs. Banker nodded and sat down. Raquel admired the caller's plain dark-blue linen dress. She excused herself and went in to ask Soledad for the coffee. Going through the bedroom, she ran a comb through her hair and passed a chamois over her face.

Mrs. Banker opened the subject as soon as Raquel sat down.

"Please take Myra as a pupil," she said. "She has a nice voice, and is very musical. Nothing like Josefina's prodigious talent! But Myra must be schooled and she could never have a finer teacher."

For a moment Raquel felt panicky. She wanted to blurt out to this assured, well-cared-for woman that she didn't know how to do things for money. She wanted to tell her that she didn't even have much common sense, running off to the seashore with a few groceries in a bag and no hope of getting more when they were gone. She wanted to tell her she was a crazy fool, expecting to be fed, like Elijah, by the ravens. The pause was only for a second, although to Raquel it seemed like a year.

"Where could I give the lessons?" she asked.

"For the rest of the summer, you could teach at the hotel. When we go back to Brownsville, you can share my studio if you like. I only teach three days a week."

"That would be pleasant," Raquel found herself saying, "I don't know what is customary about the fees."

For a long time Mrs. Banker appeared to study Raquel.

'She wants to help me,' Raquel thought. 'But she doesn't want me to know it. Her intuition tells her this is a vital thing to me.'

At last Mrs. Banker spoke. "Nothing you may ever do, Señora, will be the usual. Set a high price on yourself. Great and distinguished people have given of their best to you. They gave you their knowledge as an investment . . . I am sure it was paid for generously. Now it is time for you to draw some of the interest on that investment, their time and yours. The long hours of practice and study."

"Would five dollars a lesson be too much?"

Mrs. Banker considered for a moment.

"For Brownsville it is high," she said. "In the East it would be much too low. For the quality of the work, it is nothing at all. How long will the lessons be?"

"Until the point we are studying is made clear."

Mrs. Banker got up. "You will always give much more than you get. I hope we become good friends: we have much in common as mothers and as musicians."

"I have wanted an American friend," Raquel said.

"We will do many interesting things together. Can you begin with Myra next week?"

"Monday?"

Raquel wondered why she said Monday so quickly. Then she remembered the feeling of deprivation that always came over her on Mondays . . . even washerwomen had Monday, a day to begin a bright new week. Things had to have more pattern if they began on Monday.

"Monday is fine," Mrs. Banker said. "She will have to have three lessons a week at the beginning. They are doing an oratorio at church this winter, but I would not allow her to take part with her voice so unsure, so unmade. By the end of the summer, with three lessons a week, her voice will be in no danger from a long rôle."

"We will see to that," Raquel smiled. "Perhaps she will rebel at the long hours of vocalizing."

"Not Myra! She has a talent for drudgery."

"Isn't it perhaps the greatest of them all? Hour after hour of dull, apparently pointless work in order to achieve the final effect of perfection."

"Certainly no foundation can be laid solidly without drudgery," Mrs. Banker said. "Josefina's voice was stronger and fresher at the end of two hours' singing last night than it was when she began. It proves the soundness of your method!"

Raquel drank in Mrs. Banker's words. Praise from one who understood, even as she herself understood vocal production, was intoxicating. 'I have been away so long,' she thought, 'from talk of skill and mastery.'

"Myra is lyric?" she asked.

"Now she is . . . she is going on fifteen. I think you will agree that she has the warmth and golden quality that later will turn into a mezzo-soprano with a high range."

"That is where they make the mistake," Raquel said. "They classify by the range instead of by the quality, the natural color of the voice. I have heard contraltos with a good high C."

"My husband will be dragging the sea for me." Abby Banker smiled. "We could talk forever on this subject! Unless you find it inconvenient, I shall expect you at the hotel sometime before noon Monday."

"Until Monday, Mrs. Banker."

Raquel walked to the gate with her. When she left, Raquel raised her hand in farewell, the palm turned out, but did not speak. Her thoughts rioted. She leaned on the gatepost to steady herself. Twelve hours before, she had no future. The casual encounter of her children with Myra Banker led to freedom, temporarily, at least.

'This is the way out!' she thought. 'I must do the very best I know how.' The prospect of earning fifteen dollars a week was dizzying. 'It is wonderful to be penniless, literally without money. It should happen to everyone at least once in his lifetime. It makes us understand the everlasting miracle of daily bread.'

* * *

MONDAY MORNING Raquel dressed to go to the hotel. She did not put on her hat, even though the sun was broiling. Soledad came in with her jewel case. Raquel raised her eyebrows.

"Your pearls."

"Do you think so, Cholly?"

"It's expected. You're a *profesora* now."

Raquel thought for a minute.

"You are right. They expect a certain amount of show from me and they shall have it."

She opened a drawer and took out a pair of long black Milanese gloves that belonged to Trinidad. They looked striking against her white embroidered blouse. The rich gleam of the pearls brought out the color in her cheeks. Her braids were arranged in a coronet high on her head. Her hair shone like sable from long brushing.

"You don't look poor," Soledad said.

"It's because I don't feel poor, Cholly."

Raquel held her skirt clear of the sand until she came to the boardwalk that led to the hotel. Mrs. Banker was waiting for her on the gallery.

"Myra is inside," she said. "She didn't even go crabbing with your girls this morning she was so excited about her lesson."

Myra Banker was large for her age, smooth-skinned, well-washed, and well-developed. She got up from the piano stool when her mother and Raquel entered.

'She is placid and wholesome,' Raquel thought. 'There will be no nerves to tighten that voice into knots. Also, she has intelligence.'

"Won't you sing something first?" Raquel said.

"I don't know any arias like Josefina does," Myra said. When she smiled Raquel noticed her fine straight teeth.

'Something there to ring against,' Raquel thought. 'No nasty little squirrel mouth.'

"Remember, Myra," she said, "Josefina has done nothing but practice fireworks since she was five years old. Let us begin with something calm, please!"

"*'Solveig's Song'?* Mother will play."

Raquel walked over to the window and stood with her back to Myra for a few seconds to give the girl time to get control of herself. After a few bars, Raquel turned around to listen to the rest of the song. There was no need to spare this child. At once she saw the untrained, high breathing and smiled to herself as she thought of the difference in the richness of the tone a few breathing lessons would make.

"That was very nicely phrased, Myra," she said when the girl finished. "Shall we work now?"

"Please, Señora."

"You won't need me," Mrs. Banker said, and closed the door of the sitting room.

For over an hour Raquel worked with Myra. She placed her hands against the weak and trembling young diaphragm and had the satisfaction of feeling it strengthen and expand under her coaching.

"At first you must think hard about what you are doing . . . every second you must concentrate on your breathing. It is like a bellows that you must pump steadily and without jerkiness. Soon it will become automatic."

The two were so absorbed in their work that they scarcely heard Mrs. Banker's tap at the door.

"I'm sorry, but lunch is almost over," she said. "Will Monday, Wednesday, and Friday suit you?"

"Perfectly," Raquel said.

"Mr. Banker asked me to give you this check. He will pay by the week or by the month, as you choose."

"Weekly will do very well," Raquel took the check and folded it. When she put on her gloves, she tucked the check into the palm of her right glove.

"Won't you stay for lunch?"

"Another time, thanks! The girls will be wondering what has happened to me."

Raquel squeezed her fingers against the folded paper in her palm. She went down the steps of the hotel smiling to herself. 'This is the first money, the very first cent I ever earned in my life. It was so easy! And I really did earn it. . . I could see the improvement in even one lesson. What excites me more than the check in my hand is the fact that I can do it. Now I have a trade! Always I envied tinkers and umbrella-menders their *oficio*. Now I have a trade, too!'

Raquel had more than a trade. The Bankers were so pleased at having such a teacher for their daughter that they brought Raquel new pupils almost daily. Her ability and the prestige of her high price impressed the reluctant Mexican families. One of her pupils was a frail lad, the son of a Mexican merchant. His mother and father wanted his clear tenor voice trained, but were afraid of what exertion might do to him. The sea air was supposed to strengthen his lungs. Raquel was dubious about taking him as a pupil and spoke to Abby Banker about her qualms.

"He will be a tremendous feather in your cap," Mrs. Banker said. "They have worlds of relatives, and every one of them will want to do what Manuelito does."

"You are quite right," Raquel said. "As a sensible American, two aspects of the thing would not occur to you. First, even though Manuelito is very little older than my children, everyone of our kind in Brownsville is going to say Manuelito is in love with his teacher and what on earth do you suppose they are doing shut up in the parlor together for hours at a time? Don't look so incredulous . . . look around you and you will see that I am not exaggerating."

Mrs. Banker shook her head in wonder.

"In the second place," Raquel said, "if there is really anything wrong with his lungs and he should have a hemorrhage, all the old families will say Raquel Hidalgo strained his lungs and gave him his death."

Mrs. Banker was silent for a long time.

"What are you going to do about it?" she said.

"I don't think there is anything wrong with Manuelito but too much erotic literature and lack of exercise. I am going to ask them to send me a note from Doctor MacAllister assuring me his lungs are free from disease.

Also, I am going to have Consuelo play the accompaniments for all lessons. She is very good at it, and the practice will be fine for her."

"You started late," Mrs. Banker said, "But you are turning into a fine business woman very fast."

"I have to," Raquel said. "I think you know why I have to. You see, I know my people."

'How well I know them!' Raquel thought as she walked along the gallery on her way home. She saw the heads turn and stare and heard the *chiss-chiss* of whispers behind the elaborate fans. The Latin-American contingent was seething with curiosity; she could hear them in her mind: 'Why doesn't Fausto stop her? How did she have the nerve? What is the scandal at the bottom of this?'

And all the time she knew they had to admit that the sounds they listened to coming from behind the closed doors were good sounds, businesslike sounds that got better all the time.

'Nobody can scare me out of it . . . not even Fausto. I know what I'm doing and I give them their money's worth. Let them whisper! This is my future and my children's future.'

She bowed gracefully to a group of whispering matrons at the steps. A thought came to her: 'I must make the hotel manager take money for the use of the drawing room. If there are complaints, he will silence them quickly if it means money in his pocket. Father was right. The motto of the whole world is *Quid mihi* — What's in it for me.'

DURING THE MONTH of August, Raquel worked hard preparing her pupils for a concert in Point Isabel before returning to their homes. The American parents were pleased and vociferous. Even the haughty and suspicious Mexican families consented to let their daughters appear in the concert. Raquel grasped them by their Achilles heel, the one thing they knew and cared about: music.

Coming out of the hotel sitting room after a hot afternoon's work, she sat down with Mrs. Banker to have coffee.

"The parents want the concert repeated in Brownsville," Abby Banker said.

Raquel's excitement showed in her face.

"You will get many new students after the concert," Mrs. Banker said. "I think you should sing, too."

"It has been a long time since I did anything like that," Raquel said.

"You must, from now on. These people are human . . . they want to see what you can do, and what they can expect from you for their children."

"I suppose you are right," Raquel said. "But my mind is firm on one thing: I cannot and will not take students just because they can afford to pay for the lessons. I sent the Celaya girl home today."

Mrs. Banker looked thoughtful. "They are a powerful clan."

Raquel nodded. "I know. She loves to sing and has the most epically ugly voice I ever heard . . . it is almost laughable. I just can't do it. Perhaps I am aiming too high, but my hope is that when a student comes to me and is accepted, it will mean to the rest of the world that the person is talented musically – and has a good voice."

"With you it is a matter of integrity. Never let anything make you go against your instinct."

Raquel finished her coffee.

"I do not understand it at all . . . a little over a month ago, my life was a vacuum. Now it is a struggle to find hours enough in the day. I was frightened when I began; not so much of the teaching as of the business part. You never met my aunt, Trinidad Hidalgo, did you?"

"I have heard of her."

"I am sorry she will not be here for the concert – you would enjoy her. She is good for everyone but herself. When I set the price for the lessons, Trini must have been prompting me all the way from Washington!" Raquel smiled as she thought of Trini's worldly wink and her gesture of rubbing thumb and forefinger together.

"I don't know much Spanish," Abby Banker said. "But in my little book there is a saying that nothing can be good and cheap."

Raquel got up.

"Thank you for the coffee. I must go and see what the girls are doing."

On her way home she passed the store. Soledad wanted five yards of white voile to make a new dress for Raquel to wear at the concert.

'I will let her come down and get it. It's a long time since she has been able to walk into a store and buy anything,' Raquel thought. She had hoarded her dollars jealously. The big break, the wrench of having nowhere to go, not even Trini's cottage, would come soon enough. The white dress would be an investment. She had to have it, for Soledad's sake. The whole outlay would not be more than a dollar or so. Soledad's fingers would transform the plain white goods into a cobweb, a cloud of white filaments.

Raquel thought of the beautiful and costly things of her girlhood, but without regret. 'The voile dress will have more meaning for me because it was made with love.'

She pondered on the way values grew and changed in proportion to the growth of the mind and soul.

'Freedom. That's the first thing. It amounts to keeping one's wants small.'

That night Soledad sat by the lamp pulling threads in the bodice of Raquel's new dress. Raquel watched her and saw the light of creation in Soledad's eyes . . . this dress would be the embodiment of all her skill. "Don't do any more on it by that poor light, Cholly." Raquel rose and went down the walk to the front gate. The restless sea took hold of her. She went back to her bedroom and took off her slippers. Her tennis shoes made scarcely a sound on the matting.

"I am going for a walk," she said.

Soledad looked up at her quickly: "Don't tire yourself. Put something around you."

Raquel picked up a shawl. Down the path she walked to the edge of the sea. Her body tingled with coolness. The blood pulsed in her veins. The drowsy sense of heaviness she had experienced three times since May pressed down through her elation with its unmistakable significance. The shells along the beach crunched under her shoes. A white edge of foam curled and churned against the sand. The air was moist and cool and she hugged her shawl around her.

Longing crept into her whole being . . . an overwhelming desire to be held close by someone dear to her, someone strong.

'What I really want is a strong, clean, sunbrowned body . . . it doesn't have to be Fausto's body.'

For a moment she wondered that she felt no shame at such a thought, but she knew her longing was nothing more than an expression of her physical well-being. She knew that the longing, the painful beauty of her feeling, was the first installment on the price of staying alive.

'Under each changing moon there will be these white nights. They must be weathered as best they can.'

Raquel quickened her pace and moved higher up on the shore . . . her feet were getting cold from the wet sand. The stars were pale and jagged against the deep blue sky. They seemed to be looking at Raquel and trying to help her.

'They are so old,' she thought. 'So old and so wise. "Go ask of the stars." No wonder the ancients read our destiny in the stars! If they can make me steadfast, content to live each day as it comes, fixed and changeless in my purpose as they are . . . there is nothing I need fear.' Unconsciously she slowed her walk as she gazed up at the sky. 'The stars have seen so much – and still remain unmoved. When I look up and ask them for endurance, they give it quickly and generously. There is a contact with the stars. Encouragement is in their light and in the psalmody of the sea.'

She stood for a while listening to the ocean, then turned back toward the cottage. She walked slowly, calm and at ease. The tension had gone out of her. A sense of bodily peace flowed over her and she felt full of beauty.

Two days before the August concert, Raquel and Soledad were rocking on the porch of the cottage watching the fishing launches return at sunset.

"Six o'clock," Soledad said. "The train just whistled."

Consuelo and Josefina were down at the station watching the train come in. The arrival of the evening train bringing fathers, beaux, and visitors was the high point of the day to summer residents.

"Did many get off?" Raquel asked, her curiosity aroused by the sudden tension in Soledad's attitude. She was halfway out of the rocker, her brown hands gripped the arms of the chair tightly.

"One too many!" Soledad said. Raquel got up and looked down the road. Fausto Hidalgo was walking stiffly beside his daughters keeping to the outside of the wooden banquette. His face was withdrawn and cold.

"And now?" Soledad asked.

"Stand firm!" Raquel's voice was unsteady. "We have no place for him here. Don't leave me alone with him one minute, Cholly! No matter what."

"Not even if he orders me to?"

Raquel shook her head.

"Not even if you order me to?"

"Least of all then!" Raquel said. "For if I do, you'll know I am out of my mind." Raquel touched the smooth waves of her hair and pulled the front of her white wrapper more closely together. The sight of Fausto stirred her deeply.

The girls did not say anything as they came up the steps with their father. Their faces were as expressionless as newly washed slates.

Raquel was glad Fausto had the reticence of Border men who believed that love-making should be confined to the privacy of the bedroom.

"You are looking very well, Raquel," Fausto said gravely. He nodded to Soledad. "The girls look coarse and brown. Look at their legs! I believe they have been going without stockings."

"I think the sun is good for them." Raquel ignored Fausto's tone.

He looked around at the porch with contempt.

"You must have had enough of this camping-out by now. It's time you came back."

"We aren't coming back," Raquel said.

"Say that again?" No one on the porch appeared to breathe.

"I said we aren't coming back."

Raquel watched Fausto struggle for composure.

"I have been very patient about this thing, Raquel." He appeared to be fighting for calm with every syllable. "This scandal of giving music lessons! It's a disgrace to my name and I won't tolerate it for one instant longer. This is the worst affront a man could have . . . the idea of you taking money from people who despise you!"

"Are you quite sure they despise me, Fausto? They have shown me more respect than I am accustomed to at home."

"That's ridiculous. I will not have you carrying on like something out of a Cuban tent show. I am willing to forget this mess and take you home."

"Thank you, Fausto. But I'm not coming home."

"Think seriously, Raquel. You can't keep this up – and I won't give you one cent."

"When I ask you for a cent, that will be the time to refuse me," Raquel said calmly. "I came here to get well and escape from scenes . . . and I have. Already I am a different person. If you have come here to make a row, I'll have to ask you to leave."

Fausto looked incredulous.

"You are my wife – and I don't have to take this nonsense."

Raquel shrugged. "That's up to you, Fausto. Soledad and I have things to do in the kitchen. We are hungry."

"Let her do it!" Fausto growled. "Or the girls. I have to talk to you."

"There isn't anything you can't say in front of them," Raquel said. "You'll have to come out to the kitchen . . . the girls are starved after being in the ocean half the day."

She looked at Fausto's face, closed and mulish. He followed the women to the kitchen. It was a small lean-to with a board wall on one side only. The other three sides were made of lattice. In one corner stood a waist-high cooking hearth and chimney. Soledad blew up the fire and began to clean a string of flounders she drew out of a bucket of salt water.

The girls stood around looking awkward. Raquel could see the thought written on their faces: 'We are not going back! We are not going back!' It strengthened her to see that there was no fear in their faces. They trusted her and relied on her judgment.

Fausto sat on an empty box, his face gray. Raquel gathered up a wooden bowl and a chopping knife. She began chopping green chiles and tomatoes. Her hand trembled slightly on the knife, for Fausto was staring at her.

"Isn't there a glass of brandy on the place?" Fausto said.

"We can't afford it," Raquel said.

"It's disgraceful! Living like hand-to-mouth tatterdemalions!"

Raquel laid down the paring knife.

"Coming from you, Fausto, that is really amusing. Now this is what I want to know: Do you want to sit here peaceably and have something to eat with us, or do you want to fight?"

Fausto was speechless.

"If you want to fight and annoy us, the girls will go for the constable, and he will make you go."

"I believe you would have the nerve," he said at last.

"Never doubt it for a moment," Raquel said. "I have learned a great many things since I have been here. I support my children and am entitled to freedom from annoyance under my own roof. You forget that this is Trini's house . . . not yours."

The muscles in Fausto's neck bulged and dark blood rushed to his face.

"Pack your stuff tonight," he said. "I am taking you back on the morning train."

Raquel was spreading a white cloth on the table. She stopped and leaned across the table toward Fausto. His eyes traveled hungrily along the line of her breasts.

"What you can't seem to get through your head is the fact that we are not going back with you. I am getting along splendidly and intend to fulfill my obligations to my students. We are asking nothing from you. Have some supper and then get yourself a room at the hotel."

Soledad and the girls were huddled in a corner by the fireplace. Raquel trembled inwardly. 'He is beginning to realize that I mean what I say . . . the fight has not even begun yet.'

Fausto got to his feet. "To the hotel!" he said.

"Where else? We have one small bedroom and four cots." Raquel saw the blood begin to flow back into Fausto's face.

"You are coming with me," he said.

"I am not," Raquel said gently.

"Then I stay right here until I take you back on the train tomorrow!" Fausto's voice was grim.

"Do as you please, Fausto. We often sit up all night watching the moon set and the sun rise."

Fausto took some bills from his pocket and handed them to Soledad.

"Go down to Champion's and get me a bottle of Hennessy's."

Soledad put her hands behind her back and shook her head.

"Do as I say! I have things to talk over with my wife!"

Again Soledad shook her head.

Fausto whirled on Raquel.

"So you think you'll keep me from trying the best way in the world to convince you! It won't work, Raquel. If you have no shame, why should I have any? I want you and need you and I'm going to have you. I have every right in the world on my side! You need me and you know it . . . it's disgraceful! A man standing begging his own wife!"

"I'm not going with you."

"Why, in God's name?"

"Because staying away from you is what it costs me to stay alive. I owe something to my living children. I like it this way . . . I'm thin, free! Light!" She turned and pulled her white housegown tight around her waist. Fausto followed the contour of her body with eyes in which anger and desire fought. Desire won. He came close to Raquel and touched her hair with a hand that trembled. She steeled herself against his caress. She felt faint and breathless as she saw the flare of his nostrils. The dear, familiar way Fausto's arm slipped around her waist made Raquel tremble. Was this not the reason human beings were created male and female? What weight did high resolves carry when balanced against the splendor of the moment? Fausto's lips grazed Raquel's cheek and she felt herself turning her lips toward his searching mouth.

"Hijo de la gran puta!" Soledad screamed, flapping a cloth wildly. The fish in the iron frying pan had burned and the fat caught on fire. The girls scurried about for sand and water. Raquel began to shake violently. She turned her back on Fausto and walked to the back door.

Fausto picked up his hat silently and went down the road.

RAQUEL LAY AWAKE all night trying to picture the future. Her decision was irrevocable. She did not know where she would go to look for a place to live. Where would she get furniture? Cots to sleep on and chairs to sit in? The weight of things she had taken for granted all her life bore down on her. 'The poor survive,' she thought. 'There are so many of them. Surely there must be expedients that let them manage somehow.'

She wished that she did not have to depend for her livelihood on something so precarious as music lessons. Already she had learned the capricious nature of colds and sore throats. She was sure Fausto would put every possible obstacle in her way. 'Perhaps,' she thought, 'since Fausto is so disliked in Brownsville, people may not listen to what he has to say. But the Latin-Americans, the men anyway, will stick with him on principle. No wife must be allowed to get the reins in her hands.'

The difficulty of her situation magnified itself by the hour. She felt trapped, not able to advance or retreat. Her instinct was to find inexpensive shelter for herself and the girls, something she could be sure of paying each month. The snobbish families of the Border would look down on her, but so long as she supplied them with instruction that they could not get anywhere else, she would be necessary to them.

'The false-front, the gaudy cape of the Spaniard who has no shirt to wear underneath it, is what I am trying to do away with. My girls must learn to say, "This is what we can afford and this is what we have." And they must do it with the knowledge that they possess the greatest of all riches – freedom from debt and obligation to anyone!' Dawn was coming over the sea in red streaks. The morning was chilly and Raquel pulled a blanket up from the foot of the cot. 'Morning shows the way,' she thought.

She dressed carefully after she had her coffee, for she was certain Fausto would come back. He came at nine, very drawn and white. Raquel was no longer afraid of herself.

"It's no use, Fausto," she said kindly.

"This business of staying alive . . ." he said.

"It's true . . . I can't live with you any more."

"I don't believe it! These crazy American quacks . . . "

"Even if there were no physical risk, Fausto, I wouldn't go back. It wasn't a right thing."

"You really are out of your mind! What kind of life can you have? The girls will be ostracized. Have you thought of the disgrace . . . living in some hovel, subject to every insult from the street?"

"Now you think of the girls," Raquel said. "You never noticed that they were not invited to even the poor parties Brownsville affords. You never saw that no little friend of theirs ever crossed the front step."

"Raquel, I'm asking you one last time: Come home and behave like a decent woman."

"For the first time since I married you, Fausto, I am behaving like a decent woman."

For a long time he stared at her. She had never seen such hatred in a human face.

"There is only one answer to this abominable mess: you are in love with someone else!" Fausto said. "But he will never get you. I'll kill you first!"

Raquel could see him searching his mind, looking everywhere and anywhere for an object to fasten the blame on . . . anything or anyone would do so long as he did not have to blame himself. She had never thought of Fausto before as being stupid.

"I would never attempt to convince you, Fausto," she said. She heard steps coming up the path and saw Mrs. Banker coming up the walk. Raquel was glad to see her. 'Surely he will go now,' she thought. She was amazed at her own attitude. She was not relieved to think that help had arrived, for she needed no help. She felt relieved in the same way she might have been at the arrival of a charming guest who would help get rid of a boring one.

"This is my husband," she said to Mrs. Banker.

Fausto bowed stiffly. "It's time for my train. Think it over, Raquel." He went down the steps quickly.

"I brought the programs," Mrs. Banker said, and untied a brown paper package. "They look very well. The parents love to see their children's names in print."

Raquel did not answer. She was watching Fausto's indignant back down the road.

When she turned to Mrs. Banker, she saw that her friend had sensed the situation.

"I am not going back," Raquel said.

Mrs. Banker looked at her for a long time.

"You must do what is right for you," she said.

Raquel nodded, staring ahead of herself into space. "No matter what, we could never have less than we had."

Mrs. Banker said nothing.

"I don't know where we will live. We have no furniture – nothing."

"You won't need much of a house. You want something that will leave your time free for teaching."

"I will only have what I earn."

"You will be successful. I have been wanting to ask you if you would share my studio . . . it is rather expensive for me alone, as I use it only three days a week. I would need it on Saturdays, as most of my students go to school during the week."

"Mine are older," Raquel said, "and could come any time. I shall have to have a place to teach – and I would like to be near you."

"Do you know where the San Carlos Hotel is?"

Raquel shook her head.

"It's quiet and decent. They have light-housekeeping rooms."

"You'll think I'm stupid, but I don't know what that is."

"You get two or three furnished rooms, not elaborate, but clean and cool. There will be a small kitchen where you can prepare simple meals. They also have bathrooms."

"It sounds ideal, but it might be too expensive."

"It's very reasonable. Lights and water are included.

You have only one bill to pay. We stayed there while our home was being built."

"I would like to see it," Raquel said. Her spirits revived as she tried to picture the rooms. "Everything will depend on how many students keep on with me in September."

"Try to realize your own worth!" Abby Banker said. "I don't think you will lose one of them."

"My imagination runs away with me," Raquel said. "There cannot be any failure for me . . . too much depends on what I am doing. Now that I have made the break, I am beginning to realize the size of my undertaking. Plans are running through my head about the classes. I feel that the more demanding and strict I am, the more people will respect me."

"And think about this: Begin the way you mean to end. You must insist that the lessons be paid for in advance."

"There is no other way for me."

"Make the rich pay for the poor . . . the really talented ones who cannot afford to pay, you can teach on a scholarship. Never, never alter the price in any way."

"That is how it seems to me," Raquel said. "From the beginning, money matters must be kept very clear."

"You will enjoy your work more every day. There will be new contacts through your singing and through the girls at school. You will have a pleasant life."

Raquel was far away, thinking of something else. "Could you rehearse with me this afternoon? I'd love to have you accompany me at the concert. I'm going to do *Sonnambula.*"

Mrs. Banker took Raquel's hand.

"I'm so glad!" she said. "You have to put your best foot forward, and after a while you will love singing in public."

Raquel sighed and followed Mrs. Banker to the gate.

"I have always loved it," she said. "It was wrong to keep the song locked away. The Sleepwalker is a fitting rôle. Asleep or awake, it matters little. What matters is that the first uncertain, wavering steps are being taken. The first effort is great, the struggle to stand alone, naked and quivering, like a moth trembling and stretching its wings to dry in the sun."

"All birth is a painful thing," Abby Banker said. "I'll be free after five if you come over."

Raquel went back to the house feeling grateful for Abby Banker's calm matter-of-factness. 'It is like a rope ladder to me, a ladder that brings me back to earth safely from the craggy places of my thoughts.'

RAQUEL LOOKED ABOUT her at the small sitting room in the San Carlos Hotel. It was the eve of All Saints' Day.

'Eight weeks,' she thought. 'We have been here only eight weeks, and already it is difficult for me to remember how it was before.'

The room was plainly furnished and it shone with cleanliness. The furniture consisted of willow chairs and stools made by the Mexicans. The floor was covered with straw matting, smooth and cool. Against one wall was a large folding couch covered with a bright *sarape*. The girls slept on it at night.

To the left, a door led into a bedroom that contained two single beds and a bureau. There was scarcely room for a chair.

"This room is so small that when the sun comes in, we have to get out!" Soledad said when she saw it. A row of hooks with a curtain in front of them served as a clothes press.

Raquel went to the kitchen. Soledad and the girls sat at the kitchen table making artificial flowers for the Day of the Dead. The room smelled of sulphur and crêpe paper. The kitchen was actually a balcony that had been closed in. Although small, it was airy and light.

Raquel pulled up a chair and took up a handful of the fine wires that were used for the stems of the flowers. She wrapped them deftly with strips of green crêpe paper.

'Even in a tropical country, All Souls' Day brings a feeling of bleakness and decay.' The lush trees seemed to be shriveling. A norther would make them shudder and wilt. The melody of Strauss's *Allerseelen* flowed through Raquel's head with wintry melancholy.

'With a wealth of natural flowers,' Raquel thought, 'how odd is the Mexican predilection for artificial ones!' Through the open window she could smell the camphor odor of the chrysanthemums.

"Any night now we can expect a norther," she said. "All the flowers will turn brown and the *despedidas* will all be gone." She loved the Spanish name for chrysanthemums. They were indeed farewells.

Soledad and the girls worked silently and swiftly. In a corner of the kitchen stood a large wicker basket filled with paper roses, calla lilies, and dahlias.

"All those since morning," Soledad said.

The girls were dipping stamens into melted candle grease and then into loose sulphur.

Raquel thought they looked tired.

"Go down to Alonzo's for some sweet bread. It's time for the chocolate." Soledad rose and lit the oil stove. Raquel remembered the trouble it gave her when they first came to the apartment.

"Now I would not go back to a woodstove for anything," Soledad said. She covered the basket of flowers with a clean cloth. "No ashes to clean out."

"One gets used to anything, with time."

"I am glad the flowers are done," Soledad said. "The flower-seller's boy will be here in the morning for them. Now I can work on your dress. It's lucky for us that your clothes were so good to begin with . . . this way we turn and make over and nobody is the wiser!"

"Don't use your eyes any more today, Cholly. You have been sitting over the table making flowers for three or four days . . . it's time we got out a little. After the chocolate, I would like to ride the trolley out to the Bankers'. They have been so good – and I have never called on them."

"They are decent people," Soledad said. "Working with her has been fortunate for you. She shows you the road."

"I don't know how I would have managed without her," Raquel said.

Although she had been teaching for almost four months, it was still a source of wonder to Raquel to see her own work providing a home for herself and her children. Sometimes in the night she would wake with a start, wondering how she was going to pay the rent. Then she would remember the comforting slips of paper in her bag – the checks for the lessons. Many weeks were poor – sore throats, colds, and varied indispositions cut into her earnings.

Consuelo and Josefina required little in the way of books and school supplies. Raquel bought two expensive middy blouses for the girls – had them sent from the East. After that, Soledad copied them so faithfully that they could not be distinguished from the originals.

'The big concert in September helped me,' Raquel mused. 'The Army set from Fort Brown and the Mexican diplomatic delegation lent importance to the recital.' She remembered how proud she had been when flowers were passed to her across the footlights.

For weeks at a time she forgot that Fausto Hidalgo existed. Often, when she passed the white, silent mansion, she could scarcely make herself believe that she had ever set foot inside of it. Those were the good weeks, the busy weeks when she gave no thought to Fausto. At other times she felt nervous about him, wondering what his next move would be. Several times the girls had seen him across the street from the school, sitting on his horse watching them. When they came out and walked with their friends, he rode away without speaking to them.

In her new contentment, Raquel hoped that Fausto had made some kind of life for himself. 'No one can do it for him,' she thought. 'Life is too brief to be wasted in rancor and regret. What core of hope is it within me that makes me keep on expecting him to be what I want him to be, instead of what he really is? I am not much of a realist.' She spoke to the girls.

"Take your jackets. It will be chilly after sundown." Soledad had a fine black cashmere shawl over her sateen dress. Raquel thought the girls looked smart and distinguished in their plain blue serge skirts and jackets. She smiled at the size of the black moiré bows they wore above their long braids.

"You know, Mama," Josefina said, "you always do everything backwards, but it comes out with a stunning effect!" Raquel knew Josefina was referring to her habit of wearing black silk stockings with white pumps. "Even the lining of your coat! Anyone else would have the black wool on the outside and the white silk lining inside, but not you!"

At the corner of Elizabeth Street they got on the trolley car and rode out past the lake, to the end of the line in West Brownsville. The wicker-covered seats were comfortable and the ride was pleasant.

The Bankers' home was set in a large grove of orange trees. Tubs of ferns sat on the front porch, shaded by a green-and-white-striped awning.

"How wonderful of you to come!" Mrs. Banker said. As Raquel put her wrap to one side, she observed the signs of full, easy living that marked the home of a happy family. The smell of the house was good: rich, kindly, and sustaining. Beeswax, from the old lovely mahogany. A clean, inviting smell came from a great bowl of eucalyptus pods. She noticed the bright, tingling odor of newly washed windows and freshly starched curtains. And somewhere, pervading the house like incense, a spicy fruitcake was stored away.

"You like it here?" Mrs. Banker said.

"It's heaven!" Raquel said. "Our way is cold and pretentious. You have warmth and friendliness in your house along with great dignity."

"Come to the sun parlor. Mr. Banker has a friend there from the East. You will all stay for supper and Donald Worden will drive you back to town in his automobile."

For a second, Raquel felt as though she must say "no." Through the window she saw a man's well-tailored back and saw the girls seated on the floor playing Parchesi with Myra. 'I can stay if I want to,' she thought.

"You are very kind," she said. "It will be a great treat for us."

Mrs. Banker took Raquel to the kitchen to meet Katy, her Irish housekeeper. Soledad and Katy were already huddled over a crochet pattern. Copper pots simmered on the big range. The whole kitchen breathed of comfort and plenty.

"You'll be coming often," Katy said, holding Raquel's hand.

Raquel nodded and followed Abby Banker to the sun parlor. Their calm acceptance by this family touched Raquel.

'They don't heap you with empty phrases – "This house belongs to you!" "Whatever I possess is yours!" – the way our people do. They let you know without fuss that they are glad you came, that they truly want you. This is the atmosphere I have always wanted for my girls."

Mr. Banker and his guest rose to meet Raquel. She was happy to be in the company of men once more. "Your beautiful country is untouched as yet." Mr. Worden's glance was interested but impersonal. It gave Raquel courage to talk to him.

"Water is the secret, I think."

Mr. Worden looked surprised.

"Deep water," he said. "I am delighted that you think so, too."

Mr. Banker smiled.

"Donald has vision — and courage," he said. "He tackles things that others claim are impossible. He also has a Midas touch."

Raquel wondered what his particular interest might be.

Katy stood in the door and Mrs. Banker rose. At the table Raquel watched her girls. It was the first time they had dined in an American home. The unfamiliar table did not seem to embarrass them in the least. The food was delicious, Raquel thought, so different from their own rather monotonous daily fare.

"You do yourselves well," Worden said after he tasted the duck roasted with bitter oranges and guava jelly.

"I have never eaten wild rice before," Raquel said. She enjoyed the icy Chablis that was served with it. 'How many years,' she thought, 'since I had a glass of wine?'

The candles cast soft shadows over the table. Dark red carnations and white narcissi drooped over the soft damask.

'In our anxiety to keep afloat, we have forgotten the small, lovely things,' she thought. 'Surely we can have flowers on the table.' She wondered how many American families lived as well as the Bankers. It was certainly a modest home, compared to the marble splendor of the Hidalgo mansion and other Latin-American houses. 'The difference,' Raquel thought, 'is that here there is love. All the things these people share are represented here. Books . . . all the way to the ceiling. The people they have known and loved are photographed along the walls. Mr. Banker's awards for experiments, framed and shown proudly. Mrs. Banker's music overflowing the cabinets and shelves. Her knitting and Mr. Banker's pipes. Myra's games and schoolbooks. It would be impossible to picture cruelty and unkindness here.'

The girls were listening entranced to the phonograph. Myra was playing her Caruso records for them.

'If the time ever comes,' Raquel thought, 'when we have a home again, this is how I want it to be.' The true meaning of her thought made her ashamed. 'Most of what distinguishes this home could not be bought for money. I have books and pictures too. The girls need them quite as much as they need food and clothing. Fausto cannot stop me from taking what is mine.'

Donald Worden drove Raquel to Brownsville. Soledad and the girls sat in the back seat and Raquel sat in front with him. She was excited over riding in an automobile. It seemed to her that they traveled at great speed. Her hair blew about her face and she put up her hands to keep it in place.

"A woman never looks lovelier than when she has her hands above her head," Worden said. Raquel was glad it was dark. She felt flustered as a girl at the compliment. They spoke very little.

"I am glad you think our Valley has a future," Raquel said at last.

"I know it has. Produce undreamed of in the past will be grown here. The secret is in water. Water to grow the crops and water to ship by. Land that has been almost valueless for generations, used for free grazing and pasture, will be worth thousands of dollars in a few years. Hold on to what you have!"

Raquel smiled in the darkness. Hold on to what she had: three hundred dollars in the bank in San Antonio and her mother's jewelry.

When Worden pulled the car up to the sidewalk, Raquel saw a tense figure standing across the street. She wondered how long Fausto had been standing there.

"I am at the Miller Hotel," Worden said. "I should like very much to see you again, if you will let me. Perhaps you and your daughters would care to drive across the International Bridge one evening."

Raquel spoke very gently. She did not want to offend this urbane, kindly man.

"You are most kind, but I am afraid it is out of the question. Thank you for bringing us home." Soledad and the girls were already on the sidewalk.

Donald Worden helped Raquel out of the car and looked at her silently. She stared across the street and he turned his head to see what drew her attention. Fausto whirled angrily and walked quickly around the corner.

"Anything I can do?" Worden said.

"Nothing," Raquel said.

"If there ever is anything . . . "

"Good night," Raquel said. "And please understand."

Soledad and the girls went into the kitchen to tie up the paper flowers. Raquel sat in the dark living room. She wished Fausto would come back and ring the doorbell. In her present mood, she felt more than a match for him. Let him accuse her of having a lover . . . she knew what was going on in his mind and could answer him.

'But he will not come tonight,' she thought. 'I know him so well! Like every bully, he is a coward. He will not make a fight while even the memory of a man's protection is with me.'

She rose and turned on the light. The twisted green cord hanging from the ceiling, with the bare bulb like an unwholesome fruit at the end of it, annoyed her. The lamps! That was part of the secret at the Bankers'.

'Tomorrow I shall buy some lamps whether I can afford them or not.' She ran over in her mind the things she meant to take from the big house. Her books and her little writing desk. Her father's portrait. The engravings of his home in Ireland. The letter Porfirio Díaz had written her when first he heard her sing: "Child of milk and almonds," it began. She would frame it and place it beside the miniature of her mother.

'For these small relics actually make me what I am,' she thought. 'Our souvenirs explain all of us. The girls must learn who their forebears were and what they stood for. They must evaluate honestly the good and the bad they have inherited, to guard against weakness.'

Raquel thought proudly of the way the girls had blossomed in the few months they had been away from Fausto.

'In my heart, I have been ashamed of our meager way of living, but no longer! The only shame is to be ashamed of what one has to offer. The girls must invite their friends, and soon. They can't compete in American ways, so they must offer the things Northern boys and girls have never seen — our native things.

they must always stay within their own picture frame.'

She rose and went into the bedroom. As she brushed her hair, she went over the schedule for the next day. She had a full teaching day. A new pupil was coming all the way from Laredo for an audition. 'They are beginning to have confidence in me when they send their daughters to board with relatives here in order to study with me. It is doubly important for me to have an interesting background. These young people must have more to take home than a set of vocal gymnastics.'

It was after four the next afternoon when Raquel met Soledad as agreed in front of the Hidalgo house.

"Tell him to wait," Raquel said, nodding at the boy who pushed the two-wheeled handcart. "Send him round to the garden gate when they answer the door."

Raquel opened the big iron gate and went up the front walk. The front yard had not been watered recently. Fernando answered her ring. Beyond him she saw Fausto sitting in the patio having coffee. She turned and waved to Soledad to take the cart round to the back.

"I'm coming in for my things," she said to Fernando.

Fausto heard her voice and got up.

"To what do I owe this honor?" he said.

"I'm taking my things."

"Even if I let you, how do you propose to get them to your . . . *jacal*?"

"I'll take them to my hovel in a handcart. Soledad is outside with the flower-seller's boy. You can't stop me from taking what is mine."

Raquel walked to the gate in the patio and opened it.

"Come in," she said to Soledad.

She went into her bedroom and got the books and pictures she wanted. Fausto stood in the door watching her.

"Help the boy lift the desk onto the cart, will you?" He called Fernando to lift the desk and stalked into the living room.

Raquel followed him to get her father's portrait.

"Why don't you take the piano?" he said.

"Our living room is too small for it." She took the soft Manila shawl from the piano and wrapped it around the portrait.

"You will be a fine sight going through the streets with a handcart like a Mexican refugee," Fausto said.

Raquel smiled. "Refugees are part of every revolution, Fausto."

He stared at her and his face began to work.

"You don't even care! You are hard, and miserable, and insensitive. How can I lose so much and you lose nothing?"

Raquel walked to the door and handed Soledad the portrait. "Go on home now. I will be there in a little while."

Soledad looked apprehensive. Raquel put her hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right, Cholly. Fausto and I are going to talk a little." She could not understand her own calm. She was mistress in this house as she had never been before. Fausto was going to put her on every rack he could invent. She was prepared for that when he spoke of his loss instead of flying into jealous accusations.

"Sit down, Fausto."

He sat on the sofa and Raquel pulled up a chair to face him.

"You say I feel no loss, Fausto. How could I? You gave nothing . . . nothing of yourself."

"I gave you everything. I never went near anyone else."

"I am sure that is true, Fausto. But that is a negative kind of virtue. I am the last one in the world to expect you to live the way I do. You must know by this time that I will never live with you again."

He rose and stood close to her. His face was yellow like a tallow candle. The whites of his eyes were streaked and blurred. For a long time he did not speak, just glared at her with mingled fear and hate. When his voice came, it was a thin dry thread of tone . . . a sound that reminded Raquel of the futile scraping of a dry pen-point on paper.

"You have taken everything," he said. "My reputation, my children – even my manhood." His voice was cold and dead. "You speak of arranging some kind of a life for myself . . . don't you think I've tried? You'll be completely happy now: I've tried and I can't. Nothing! That's your work . . . I ought to kill you."

Raquel scarcely breathed. Her hands were icy.

"You don't want me, but you lie there like the dog in the manger, cursing me so nobody else can have me. Take your witchery off, Raquel. You ought to leave a man something!" He took a step closer to her and she drew back. At her gesture he stopped.

"I'm not going to bother you," he said. "I just want you to know what you've done. I'm dead. Finished. I cannot feel anything, not even for you. I wish you would go."

He slumped down on the sofa and held his head in his hands. For several minutes Raquel stood frozen. Her heart ached in her side with compassion for him. She felt no desire toward Fausto and would only outrage him if she touched him in friendship. She took a deep breath and walked out of the room. She found herself closing the iron gate. The hot afternoon sun was welcome after the chill of the house. Slowly the blood began to flow back into her congested heart.

"No one enters the house of knowledge free," she said, aloud.

THE EARLY PART of December was crowded with activity for Raquel, and she was glad. During the lulls in work at the studio or at home, she was haunted by the specter of Fausto the way he was the last time she had seen him. She slept badly and often rose to do some small mechanical task about the apartment. The place was so small that it was difficult to have much privacy. Sometimes she would slip into the kitchen and try to read, but almost invariably ended up puzzling over accounts.

'As hard as I work, there is so little left. Education is a vice, we want more of it all the time.' In the light of her new experience, Raquel saw that the future of the girls would depend upon the amount of special training they had.

'They must have the best possible preparation, otherwise they will depend on the crumbs that drop from the political table.' She noted every day with consternation the numbers of city and county employees who owed their appointments to political favor. Many of the schoolteachers were badly qualified for their jobs. They had the one necessary qualification, Raquel thought bitterly, large numbers of relatives with poll taxes paid up.

'Consuelo must go to agricultural college.' Mr. Banker had mentioned a college in California. Raquel's heart sank as she thought of the distance. 'But if it is the best, Consuelo must have it. And Josefina will go to normal school long enough to get a teacher's certificate.' The idea of Josefina as a teacher made Raquel smile. 'It is like hitching a race-horse to a plow.' But she was determined not to let her make any kind of musical audition without a teacher's certificate in her pocket. 'I hope she never has to use it, but she must have it. The life of a professional singer is too uncertain . . . one bad cold can finish a career.'

In the quiet night, Raquel thought of all the money that had been tied up needlessly in the big house. She had the feeling it would never be cleared. The ranch, too, would become the property of the bank.

'And if anything happened to Fausto?' she thought. 'What then?'

Under the law she and the girls would get part of the property, if there was anything left after the banks and lawyers picked the carcass clean.

Fausto's suffering depressed her. If what he said were true, was it truly her fault? 'Could it not be a hidden kind of protest by his body itself? An acknowledgment by his flesh, if not by his mind, of the fact that he has treated me badly?'

Raquel shook her head to dissipate the gloomy thoughts that filled it.

'Even if I alone am responsible for his state, I could have done nothing different.'

Daylight came. She saw it through the fronds of a tall palm outside the kitchen window. She got up and went back to her bedroom, glad that it was not one of her teaching days and she could sleep late. The living room looked attractive in the dim light. The things she had brought from the house and those she had bought helped to make it more homelike. The girls lay face down on the couch, their hair tumbling in dark billows around their shoulders.

'Christmas is coming, and they are still little girls,' Raquel thought. 'I must not look too far ahead and think only of the future. It is important for them to enjoy their girlhood – to have fun from day to day. They need to enjoy things now.'

She lay down on her bed, grateful for the drowsiness that came upon her.

Late in the second week of December, Raquel sat at her desk one afternoon arranging a Mexican folksong as a duet for Josefina and Myra.

Soledad and the girls were at a rehearsal of the Christmas music at the cathedral. She was absorbed in her work when the doorbell rang. When she answered the door, Fausto stood before her dressed in a dark blue suit.

"Come in, Fausto," she said. Something in his formal attire touched her.

He looked around the room and chose a straight chair.

"What's troubling you?" she said.

"I'm a sick man, Raquel."

He did look ill. His face was ashen and he was very thin.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"I don't need those fools to tell me I am dying! Inside of me something is going to explode. There is dynamite in my veins." He trembled with the effort of maintaining his calm.

"You need rest, Fausto. You need to get the bitterness and poison out of your system. Do you ever think of going to confession?"

Fausto rose from the chair like a shot.

"What have I got to confess?"

Raquel smiled. "Arrogance, for one thing."

He sat down again, as though his legs would not hold him up any longer.

"Pride is my vice," he said. "That's why I had to see you. I can't bear the looks of the people . . . they are whispering about me all the time. You know now that I can't bother you, even if I wanted to. Won't you come back? Just for appearances?"

Fausto's voice, pleading and humble, was new to Raquel. She spoke gently to him.

"I can't, Fausto. It's more than a question of being bothered. We are a house of women here . . . we live according to our own peculiar rhythm. Honestly, Fausto, we are quite contented. Coming back would not stop people from talking. They have always talked, ever since the night we met."

"Even for the children? To have them in their proper home and setting – you won't come back?"

"It isn't theirs, Fausto. Nor yours, even. It all belongs to the bank."

"Then you must help me in one last thing, Raquel, not for us, but for them. I have one chance to make some of the property free. You think I am trying to make you sorry for me by telling you I am sick. You say you have been given a death sentence that changed your life . . . why can't you believe me?"

Raquel studied his face, but did not reply.

"Before I can die there are things I have to do."

'What is riding him now?' Raquel thought. 'What crazy borrowing and pawning has he in mind this time?'

"What do you want of me?" she said.

"Very little actually. I have just come back from Ciudad Juárez where I was able to arrange a deal with a very slippery man. I want you and the girls at the ranch for Christmas."

"Why?"

"Because ten thousand head of cattle will swim the river that night."

"Whose are they?"

Fausto shrugged. "Does it matter? I will have a bill of sale. The General collects his 'advances' as he moves from state to state in Mexico."

"Are you buying them?"

Fausto nodded.

"With what?"

"The bank put up the money."

"On what?"

"On the house . . . sort of a third mortgage. They know it's a sure thing, but they can't afford to risk the deal."

"So you're the cat's-paw."

"I told you I was doing the best I could. Trying to save something. It doesn't matter what becomes of me."

"Why do you want us there?"

"Because there must be no suspicion of a trap, of treason of any kind. The General is to deliver the cattle at the ranch, sign the bill of sale, and get his money. The Rangers and the troops in Fort Brown are only twenty-two miles away. It must be the regular family Christmas celebration. God knows how I'll swing it . . . for three days there will be a crowd to feed." Fausto tried to smile: "The bank wouldn't go that far!"

"Those cattle don't belong to that bandit!"

"Can you prove it? If I don't take them, someone else will. The war has sent prices to the skies. It will leave enough clear to give me what I want."

Raquel thought for a long time.

"I cannot see why you need us."

"It is not likely that a man will call out troops and have a gun-fight in front of his house when his wife and daughters and all his dependents are there. It reassures the General of his safety."

"So he is delivering them himself! Can't he trust an agent to collect?"

"Would you?" Fausto said.

"But why? Why is he risking his life and his loot to deliver the stock himself?"

"You have heard enough of the man to know, Raquel. Vanity and conceit! Nerve. Those are his only claims to the Presidency of Mexico, and he almost has it in his pocket! He wants to be the bravest general – the one who delivered ten thousand head of confiscated cattle to the American side in person, right under the noses of the authorities – and stayed for supper."

Raquel thought hard. 'Leave it to the bank to figure out a smooth delivery!' They knew the General did not trust them, and they certainly did not trust the General! 'How could they when their minds worked so much alike?' Raquel knew the money-lenders always profited by their study of the political situation. She thought of all she had learned recently about the value of the land. 'How much more the bank must know!'

Aloud she said: "You are between the wall and the sword. If you get delivery of the cattle and sell them, the bank gets its money: for the cattle loan and some of the money you owe them on the house and the ranch. If something goes wrong, the General takes the money and keeps the cattle, or the cattle die, or you can't find a buyer for them, the bank still gets your property. Win, lose, or draw: the bank wins. They want every inch of land, for they know the future of the country. It seems to me I have no choice but to do what you ask."

Fausto was staring at Raquel with surprise.

'He is thinking he never really knew me at all,' she thought. 'It never dawns on him that there was not much there to know until I got out into the world a little.'

"I am not asking you to do it for nothing," Fausto said. "You can have the Point Isabel tract; you said once you wanted it."

"I am giving, not taking," Raquel said. "I want you to have your chance."

"Take it," Fausto said. "I will bring the deed tomorrow. It may convince you that I have no axe to grind."

'What is he after?' Raquel asked herself. She did not trust him, but she made her decision quickly.

"I will buy the land from you, Fausto. I have three hundred dollars in the bank in San Antonio. When do you want us at the ranch?"

"About the twenty-second. You'll have to see to the preparations. It must be convincing."

"You can trust me," she said.

When she closed the door after him, she thought: 'What a fool I am! If he makes the deal, he will put the money into some unnecessary atrocity for the big house!' Then she sighed. 'There is so little I can do for him! Nothing I can give him . . . except his chance.'

RAQUEL WAS READY when Fausto sent the carriage for her on Monday afternoon. Soledad and the girls were carrying packages full of Christmas decorations and last-minute extras needed for the holiday candies that would be made at the ranch.

'We are all looking for the trap,' Raquel thought as she settled herself for the long ride. 'The General is looking for a trap, and so is Fausto. I should have thought more carefully before agreeing to this risky enterprise.'

She was glad she had asked the Bankers and Donald Worden to come to the ranch for the celebration. 'Fausto really must be in need of my help when he agreed so readily to let me invite them!' She hoped things would go off peaceably. Her friends would serve as a buffer between her and Fausto's resentment.

The many possible endings of the drama occupied Raquel's thoughts for a long time. There might be violence. Fausto might be killed. She tried to examine herself honestly. Was she, without knowing it, wishing Fausto dead? She trembled inwardly, afraid to look into the pool of her thoughts.

'I have to know!' she thought. She concentrated all her heart and mind on the answer. Relief came when she found courage to face the truth:

'If I had wished Fausto dead, I would have refused him what he believes to be his one chance. Another six months the way he was going and he would have been dead. I never wanted him dead. I just wanted to stay alive myself. Must one of two die that the other may live?'

The carriage stopped. The driver got down and opened the big gate to the ranch. Raquel looked about her in admiration. All the land she could see, and more, belonged to Fausto. She wondered how many acres the ranch actually contained. Did even Fausto know the extent of his holdings? They took so much for granted, these people with their ancient lands direct from the Kings of Spain. Land, infinite and unbounded. The land was always there – and would be forever.

'That is what they think . . . the old school! They have no conception of the worth of the land. It is beyond their power to imagine great groups of men banding together in the East and in the North to form land companies, companies that are out conscripting armies of home-seekers, planning to bring them to every inch of the Valley before the finish! Fausto would say I was crazy. He doesn't know that already Cameron County is full of Northerners, people tired of ice and snow. But the bank knows! The fat spider sitting in the web knows. That is why they are offering money to people whom they know can never pay it back.'

Disgust flooded Raquel at the inequality, the basic unfairness of life.

'Why should some have more land than they can measure and others have not even a bit of land for a garden the size of a pocket handkerchief?' She sighed, for she knew the answer. 'If it were divided equally tomorrow, before sundown the realists would have taken it away from the impractical; the quick would have swindled the slow, and the energetic outdone the lazy. It's the same in the flower garden. The greedy plants push aside the meek and take all the nourishment. How can we survive in such a world?'

Raquel wondered if anyone ever really achieved freedom. 'There are so many kinds of slavery, some of them unrecognizable. I think it is even possible to be a slave to freedom itself . . . it happens to me when I think too much about it. The happiest person is the one who can love his slavery. He is truly free. I want the girls to learn that they can only eat one meal at a time and only wear one dress at a time. When they make their homes, they must not have a home larger than they can care for themselves. I have been served hand and foot all my life, yet I abhor the idea of servants.'

The hard white *caliche* driveway wound through a grove of ebony trees up to the ranch-house. The low ranch-house spread out before Raquel. Poinsettias, roof-high, waved their petals like slashed red leather against the whitewashed adobe walls. Low against the ground were mats of dark red carnations. Incongruously stiff and formal, stunted arbor vitae stood defiantly among the tropic flowers. Flaming pomegranate bushes flaunted their bells by the door.

'Nature sends red and green for Christmas,' Raquel thought as she looked at the shrubs. To the left of the house, wild orange trees were blossoming sparsely, their scent all the sweeter for being late.

'And everywhere the honey-musk scent of the ebony trees . . . no wonder the bees get drunk!' Raquel breathed deep of the fragrance she loved.

The sound of the carriage brought Gabino, the foreman, to the front yard to greet Raquel.

'The news has traveled,' she thought as he came forward to help her down. 'He is ill at ease in my presence.'

The house looked uninhabited and unloved. Raquel had not seen it for ten years. Fausto had put a stop to the family celebration shortly after their marriage.

'The heart went out of the celebration when the *patrón* and his family no longer took part. Our people feel slighted, for this is a paternalistic system of living. They look like neglected children – hurt and shy.'

Gabino's Indian wife came up twisting her bit of handkerchief.

"We did what we could," she said. "We thought you had forgotten us."

Raquel put her hand under the woman's chin and forced her to look directly at her.

"Did you, Chona?"

"Not really, Señora. I knew."

Fernando came out the front door, a smile cleaving his face.

"How glad I am you are here! Men without women . . . well, they don't know about decorations or sweetmeats . . . "

"Or anything else!" Soledad took hold of his sleeve.

"Carry this bag! It's heavier than an undowered marriage!"

"My Christmas greeting!" Fernando rolled his eyes pleadingly at Raquel.

"Peace!" she said sharply.

"You are right, Doña Raquel!" Fernando said. "I think we should bury the knife once and for all."

"Right in the middle of your guts, I'll bury it," Soledad said, "and we'll see what color they are! My half-dollar says they are yellow!" She brushed by him contemptuously with a bundle of paper garlands.

"Ave María Purísima! You don't set foot on the ranch for ten years, and right away this one starts her love-making! She could make the two halves of a breastbone fight!"

Raquel held up her hand.

"Understand this, all of you! I will tolerate no bickering nor brawling during our stay. We are not here by choice, but since we are here, we must see the thing through with a good face. American guests are coming and everything must be perfect: good tempers and courteous tongues. If Don Fausto and I see fit to conceal our differences, surely it is not asking too much of you to do the same. There is a month's work to be done here in two days . . . and no time for horseplay." Raquel turned to Soledad: "Please start the candies at once. You will need fresh eggs for the meringues and brown sugar for the *caramelos*. Chona will help you shell the pecans. Fernando, lock up all the liquor until Christmas Eve . . . the cowboys have enough to do without tippling."

Consuelo and Josefina were staring at their mother open-mouthed.

"Please breathe through your noses," she said. "Open mouths give you an idiotic expression. See what you can find for costumes, and then practice your *jarabe* . . . you haven't danced it in years and it will be expected." The girls backed out of the hall quickly.

"With your permission, Doña Raquel . . . " Fernando began.

"Well?" Raquel's mind was running on ahead making lists of all that had to be done.

"Are you going to dine with Don Fausto this evening? The family, altogether, I mean?"

"Where else?"

"Nowhere else! I was just asking!"

"I have already explained to you that everything here is to appear exactly the same as always. I am sure you know how much depends on the impression being perfect. If that is clear to you, get started at once with your work."

"You heard the Señora!" Soledad said importantly.

Fernando bowed low. "I did indeed! And with the Señora's permission, I'll give you a slap that will blow your nose! Didn't she just say that everything must be the way it has always been?"

Raquel saw Fausto coming up the walk. She was tired and nervous and wanted to be alone when she faced him. She glanced back of Fernando through the kitchen entrance.

"I think the cowboys are unpacking the raisins and peanuts that we brought."

"Sons of the Sooty One!" Fernando hurried to the kitchen, Soledad at his heels.

Raquel saw that Fausto's face was haggard. He looked as though he had not slept for many days.

"Any word?" she said.

"Christmas Eve . . . after dark. I have been enlarging corrals and strengthening fences for a week. So many of them penned up together could easily break through."

"Then we actually have only two days to do the preparation! Will there be Mass?"

"It's at Las Tres Marías this year."

"Then they can have the *Pastorela* late in place of Mass. It will keep them entertained until time for the supper. How long do you think the General will stay?"

Fausto shrugged.

"Once he gets his money, he is free to go. It will depend on how much bravado he feels. And," Fausto added, "on how good a time he is having."

"I still do not understand why he wants to be here or why you want to please him. He is in danger from the American authorities . . ."

"True enough. But he also has a large army of revolutionaries, bandits if you like, less than fifteen miles from here. They are waiting in the chaparral on the Mexican side for the faintest distress signal from their leader. Do you think there is anything they would like better than to stampede the herd of Mexican cattle back across the river, then shoot up the ranch, and loot it? I am not sure he won't call his soldiers. On the other hand, he is not sure that I won't call out the Rangers or the troops from Fort Brown. It's a game with him. It gives him something to talk about."

"I have heard that he fancies himself," Raquel said.

"It is lucky he was willing to settle for cash," Fausto said. "He usually demands Winchesters."

"That would have been too compromising for even the broadminded bank to handle!"

"You sound bitter."

"Not really. The pieces are just beginning to fall into place for me . . . the picture isn't pretty. Those outlaws are part of the gang of thieves that stole my father's mines. I wish the General – and his opponents – the best of luck!"

Fausto looked surprised.

"I hope he buys many, many Winchesters with the money. If I had anything to do with it, I would distribute the rifles, free and even, to both sides. Then they could exterminate each other more quickly and give Mexico a chance to breathe. Only when those leeches are destroyed will Mexico know the meaning of liberty." Raquel suddenly felt very tired. "I am going to lie down awhile before dinner. The Bankers will be here in time for lunch tomorrow."

"I'm not going to bother you," Fausto said.

"I'm sure of that," Raquel said quietly. "They are coming because a real Mexican Christmas is something they have never seen."

"I'll keep out of your way," Fausto's voice was gruff.

"Do you think that's wise? I have told Fernando that we will take all our meals together. Have him call me when supper is ready."

Raquel walked away from Fausto and into her bedroom at the front of the house. In all her married life she had spent only a few nights in it. It seemed strange to her. She thought it would be just as well to lock the door leading into Fausto's room: then she saw it. She saw the heavy wooden bar that had been attached to the door recently. She shrugged and lay down on the bed to rest.

'Fools that stick their heads into the mouth of a lion . . .' she drowsed off, thinking that it applied as much to herself as it did to Fausto.

LATE THE NEXT MORNING, Raquel went into the living room to see what she could do to make it look festive. She looked around her with satisfaction.

'This is real!' she rejoiced. 'No spindly French gilt chairs.' The chairs and sofas of supple rawhide were deep and inviting. Great hand-carved chests of ebony gleamed purple in the light. The tile floor was covered with soft Indian rugs. In front of the huge fireplace, the pelt of a mountain lion was stretched out, tawny, and soft as velvet.

Raquel placed an ancient woodcarving of a madonna and child on the mantel. Around the base of the statue she placed branches of arbor vitae. Among the branches she thrust tall white candles.

'They will be lovely when I light them tomorrow night. In a way, they will be the symbol of my prayers.'

Being under the same roof with Fausto had made Raquel apprehensive. There was so much for him to do outside that she had little chance to test his mood. She wondered if she had been foolhardy in asking the Bankers and Worden. Fausto's reaction to them might be unpleasant. It could be anything from ill-concealed contempt to undisguised hatred. Worst of all, Raquel thought, it could be the velvety politeness the Spaniard reserves for his enemies. 'But so long as he keeps on treating me with polite casualness the way he did at dinner last night, everything will be all right.'

She spent almost an hour arranging the flowers in the living room.

'The house always looks naked until the flowers are brought in,' she thought as she glanced at the great blue-glass jar in the window. It was filled with feathery sprays of huisache, gray-green ferny leaves and stems a mass of quivering golden balls like chenille.

'I hope they have a good time,' she thought. 'They have been so kind and I have made no return.'

The howling of a band of children sent her quickly to the door. The Bankers' automobile drove the Mexican children into a frenzy of excitement. 'It is the first one they have ever seen.' Raquel smiled at the assortment of tots that trailed in the wake of the car . . . some stark naked, some with short shirts buttoned demurely around their necks, leaving bronze bellies joyously free in the sunshine.

"The reception committee!" Raquel said as she came down the walk to meet her guests. Mr. and Mrs. Banker, Donald Worden, and Myra got out of the car laden with packages. The children made a ring around the automobile, touching the shiny metal parts and the headlights. Mr. Banker reached inside the car and blew the horn. The children screamed and scattered to the four winds.

"They must think it is some kind of fire-breathing dragon!" Abby Banker said.

"Come in and sit down where it is cool," Raquel said.

They took off their dusty wraps and sat down gratefully.

"The ride was hot and dirty, but we had no trouble at all finding the way," Mr. Banker said.

Donald Worden was examining the figure on the mantel.

"So much lovelier than a Christmas tree," he said.

"With us it is a purely religious festival," Raquel said. "There is no exchange of gifts. You will see the *Pastorela* tomorrow night . . . I hope you enjoy it."

"It is supposed to be the direct descendant of the old mystery play," Mr. Banker said.

"I will try to borrow the old script from Father Perez and show it to you . . . the whole thing is written by hand on parchment."

Fernando appeared in the door with a tray of glasses. Raquel smiled to herself. He had taken her lecture to heart and wore a white linen coat and black alpaca trousers. He placed the tray in front of Raquel.

"Don Fausto sends word that it is impossible for him to be here just now and asks to be excused."

Raquel bowed and poured out the brandy which Fernando passed. She knew Fausto had sent no message.

"What is this delightful stuff?" Mr. Banker asked.

"It is called *Habanero* . . . a deceptively light brandy." She walked about with the decanter refilling glasses. It seemed odd to her to bring these people, so entirely belonging to her new life, into the ranch-house that she loved and had never been able to occupy herself.

'And yet they fit,' she thought. 'They don't seem out of place at all! I wonder how it will seem when Fausto comes in and sits at the head of the table? Will we all freeze up?'

Mrs. Banker was looking at one of the *sarapes.*

"It is so soft it slithers out of my fingers."

"Each one has its name and its legend," Raquel said. "That black and orange one is called The Tiger. The wavy stripes meant tiger to the Indian who wove it. It is over a hundred years old."

"I don't want to get out of this chair," Mr. Banker said. His feet were stretched out on the rawhide stool in front of the big armchair. "But I am so dirty that even though it pains me to move, I am forced to wash off some of the grime."

"Fernando has already taken your bags to your rooms. Come with me and I will show you the way. Myra is in with the girls." Raquel led them down the dim, cool hall. She stopped in front of an open door.

"Mr. and Mrs. Banker in here," she said. "If the night is warm, just close the louvre door. No one will come to this wing unless you ring. The bath is here." She opened the door into a small room where a copper bathtub was embedded in old Spanish tiles of green, blue, and gold.

"I have never seen a more exquisite room," Abby Banker said. "What is that heavenly finish on the walls?"

"It is tinted whitewash. Mexicans love sky-blue. The old dark woods of the furniture show up well against it. You will find the beds comfortable. They belonged to Fausto's mother. She scandalized the Border by having two beds in her room."

"Precursors of the twin bed!" Mr. Banker laughed. "I like the idea of a full-sized four-poster all to myself."

Abby Banker put her hand on Raquel's shoulder.

"It's a pity you and the girls don't spend more time here . . . you belong here. This is your true background."

"I love it very much," Raquel said. "To me, the best part of life is that we do not know what is in store for us. The Mexican influence, I suppose! The love of the lottery . . . always hoping one day to win what they call the fat prize!"

Donald Worden came over to Raquel from the corner where he had been examining some very old paintings done on mirrors.

"I think you will get it," he said. "There is a great air of destiny about you. You were put into this world to give happiness to people – and you have. Their good wishes for you make a powerful magic! That's the longest speech I ever made in my life."

Raquel smiled. She knew she was blushing with pleasure. The way Worden looked at her made her change the subject.

"Thank you," she said. "Tomorrow you will meet a weird Mexican and his entourage. No matter what appears to be happening, show no surprise. And please do whatever Fausto asks you. The situation will not be too easy for any of us."

"I am excited, after what you sketched so quickly for us when you invited us." Mr. Banker said. "I never expected to see this fabulous generalissimo, much less sit down at table with him."

"Don't expect too much," Raquel smiled. "He is not called the Wild Boar for nothing."

"In that case, I hope you will sing for him, Señora!" Donald Worden's eyes twinkled.

"The snake-charmer's rattle would be more effective," Raquel said. "Your room is just across the hall, Mr. Worden. Lunch will be served in half an hour. Come to the living room for a drink first."

Raquel went to her room to put powder on her face . . . it felt hot from the blood that had swept over it in the last few minutes. She scarcely recognized herself in the mirror. Her eyes seemed twice their normal size and the very planes of her face seemed to have altered.

'I look bewitched,' she thought.

Soledad came in with Raquel's dress for the evening. She glanced at Raquel in the mirror.

"Wipe that look off your face! You look as though you were enjoying all this too much. The *patrón* just came in and called for his white linen suit."

"Good! Let's hope he doesn't sit there glaring at them trying to turn their food to poison."

An hour later Raquel rose from the table and Fausto pulled Mrs. Banker's chair out for her. He turned to her husband.

"After the Siesta, Mr. Banker, I shall be glad to show you over part of the ranch." Then Fausto spoke to Worden. "If you ride, sir, perhaps you will come with us."

Raquel was sure Worden was conscious of the irony.

"Thank you." Worden's voice was pleasant. "I don't want to miss an opportunity like that!"

Raquel looked at the three guests. Her feeling was one of mingled admiration and gratitude: admiration for the adroitness with which they led Fausto into topics where he was sure of his terrain; good-humor and amiability in spite of Fausto's enmity.

'Tact,' Raquel thought, 'is literally touch. Knowing how to reach people, like knowing where to take hold of a cat or a dog without hurting it. Fausto sensed it too. He was nippy because he knew they were better-bred than he was – and wouldn't bite back.'

She went to her room to lie down until time for the coffee at four. Beyond the garden fence, the carpenters were nailing together a wooden floor for the dancing that evening. Raquel looked out her window as she took her hair down and saw a lad climb a pole in the center of the platform. He hung a lantern from the top of it.

'It is rough and primitive, yet the ballrooms of Versailles did not mean so much to the court as this bit of floor to the Mexican cowhands and their families. Leather-faced, taciturn *vaqueros* will have the chance tonight to dance with the thick-waisted girl they have stared at for months. Some of them will do more than dance . . . and then a hullabaloo next summer!' Raquel thought.

'How do these embarrassed, inarticulate couples approach each other? Their need must make them oblivious to everything but their desire.' She wondered where they went. 'Into the *monte*, under the mesquite trees on the soft bed made by the dry leaves, the chaparral making a thick wall all around them, and a Christmas moon looking down on them!' For a moment she envied the girls.

"Dangerous territory!" The nearness to nature, the rich wild smell of the ranch, the bawling of the cattle, and the presence of simple, forthright people bent on enjoyment created a kind of passionate excitement in Raquel. The everlasting thrum of the guitars and the muted harmonizing of the Mexicans filled her with a troubling kind of joy.

Even at the hour of the siesta, somewhere not too far from the house, some cowboys were singing.

'I can see them in front of me,' she thought. 'Three of them. Leaning their backs against the trunk of a tree, legs spread out in front of them, hats tipped down over their eyes . . . all three of them giving forth their song. The surest way to make a Mexican cowboy happy is to give him a guitar, two comrades for the harmony, and a pint of *mescal*! What a lovely world it would be if the rest of us were so easily contented.' She listened for a moment to the monotonous syrupy thirds beloved of Mexicans. Even as she listened the rhythm of the song changed and the guitar-player began to thump the wooden part of the guitar to emphasize the syncopated *huapango* beat. At the end of each cadence, one of the men let out the *grito*, half laugh, half sob, always in perfect time with the music.

'He has had more to drink than the others,' Raquel thought. The music disturbed her profoundly. She walked back and forth brushing, brushing, brushing her long black hair.

'Here,' she thought, 'there are forces that we do not recognize, whose existence we do not even admit.' "Forces," she said aloud, "stronger than we are."

RAQUEL AND HER GUESTS sat at a big table under a huge fig tree in the center of a brick courtyard at the back of the ranch-house. The fresh smell of the fig leaves blended with the clean odor of the newly scoured red bricks. Three great black iron cauldrons that were used for rendering lard were filled with tamales steaming in their husks. Close by Fernando was turning pieces of beef over the coals with a pitchfork.

Lanterns hung high in the treetops to keep the insects away from the table. A few hens, attracted by the lights and voices, flew down from the mesquite trees and began looking for crumbs.

"What never ceases to delight me," Mrs. Banker said, "is the poise of the Mexicans. They gather into little groups and chat contentedly . . . entertaining them seems no problem at all."

"It isn't," Raquel said. "They see each other so seldom that just being with their friends is enough. Have you seen the wagons filled with straight chairs that they travel in? Many of them have come twenty-five miles. But that is understandable," she smiled. "They will go anywhere on earth if they can dance."

"They just wander about and help themselves to something to eat whenever they feel like it," Mr. Banker said. "There is no greediness or shoving."

"Those two grannies over there take my eye." Donald Worden pointed out two elderly women seated on a bench close by. They were toasting each other ceremoniously from a small flask of clear liquid.

Raquel nodded. "They love their *traguito.* Do you understand what they are saying?"

"I'd love to know!" Worden said.

"The stout one says, 'What our Blessed Lady would have given for a little nip that cold night in the stable – and her in her pains! Have a little nip for the holy season, Comadre!' 'I will,' says her companion. 'Who knows where we may be this time next year!' 'How true!' says the other one. 'Pass me the bottle!' "

"They are wonderful," Worden said. "Never pushing, never subservient. Their dignity fills me with awe."

"How could they not have it?" Raquel said. "The dignity of the Indian and the dignity of the Spaniard have blended to produce a spirit that cringes before no man alive. It has become expedient for them to regard the prejudice of others in order to stay alive, but the humblest sandal-footed bird-catcher says, 'In my hut I am king!' "

As soon as Fausto appeared in the yard, Fernando brought a heaping platter of barbecued beef tenderloin to the table. Fausto took his place at the head of the table. He poured the wine and rose.

"Health and wealth!" he said.

Raquel observed him closely.

'They must have handled him properly on the ride this afternoon,' she thought. 'He seems to have lost some of his hostility toward Worden.'

Things had gone well for her so far. She hoped that Fausto's part of the fiesta would go as well. The thought of the danger sent a chill over her.

'Any kind of dealing with a savage like the General makes my blood congeal. But Fausto thrives on excitement.' His eyes were brilliant and his whole attitude was one of acute awareness.

'I think he is prepared for anything . . . anything at all,' Raquel thought. 'Nothing the General may do will surprise him. It would be like the beast to appear a day ahead of himself to make sure Fausto had no ambush prepared for him!'

The chill Raquel felt was compounded of fear and excitement.

'It is because I feel that Fausto is capable of handling anything that could happen,' she thought. 'Has he ever done so much prudent and cautious planning? Not since I have known him!'

She recognized many of the guests. They were Mexicans from other ranches, dressed in the simple garb of *vaqueros.* But they were not cowboys – and they were not there for any love of the Hidalgo name. They were there because they were all famous shots and because the possibility of violence intrigued them.

Raquel was sure Fausto had scouts and lookouts planted in strategic points over his lands. 'Not a single calf could stray from its mother and wander across the prairie,' she thought, 'any time in the next two days without Fausto knowing of it. Fausto is in his element at last . . . he feels an unlimited sense of power. In a grudging way, I believe he is even proud of me and the girls. He is struggling with himself over the thought that if I had anything to do with Americans, I at least picked the best. His mind is sifting and sifting: there is not one thing that even his bigoted mind can find wrong with Abby Banker.'

When the coffee and brandy were almost finished, Gabino, the mayordomo, approached the table, his hat carried respectfully under his arm.

"With your permission, Don Fausto: the Señora will sing, no?"

Fausto looked at Raquel.

"Of course I will sing if they want me to."

They all rose from the table. Fausto looked at Raquel as though waiting for a signal from her. After a moment he came to her and took her arm to escort her to the dance platform. Through the thin silk of her dress she could feel Fausto's arm, sinewy and warm. It was the first time she had touched him since the night in Point Isabel.

The musicians rose as Raquel came near and the guitar-player fingered out a melody.

"*Perjura?*" he said.

Raquel nodded to him and began the song of faithless love. When she finished, no one applauded. Without a word or sign, the audience waited.

'They are waiting for something they know I used to do!' she thought. 'Ten years ago — and they still remember!' She turned to the musicians and nodded. The audience got what they wanted. No plebian guitar thrummed now. The flute, violin, and small harp began the prelude to Raquel's song. At the first notes of Schubert's *Serenade* a hushed and blissful *Ah* fluttered from the audience.

Souls who could neither read nor write, who had never been inside a theater of any kind, listened with the concentration of medieval people listening to a troubadour. The sorceress, the weaver of spells, the teller of tales stood before them. Beauty, poetry, and drama glimmered for a little space in the minds of the *peones* whose world consisted of a bit of earthen floor to sleep on, a few bites to eat, and furtive, hurried embraces in the dark crowded huts. Here before them stood the embodiment of all that they knew only through their dreams.

Raquel stood like a silver image, oblivious to everything around her, dominated by the mood of her song. She sang in Spanish, her clear, flexible voice round and true in the nostalgic minor music beloved of Latins.

In the course of the song the despair of the lover was changed to joy as the beloved relented and appeared in the window. The song was sung – ended. But the music went on, even more softly than before. The listeners maintained their trancelike hush, moved no hand to shatter the spell.

Raquel took a step forward and began to recite the poem *La Serenata.* The audience drew closer together and moved forward in a mesmeric spell. Black opaque eyes fixed themselves relentlessly on her face. The people scarcely breathed lest they miss a word.

Her voice and the power of a great poet held them spellbound. His simplicity was well within their small comprehension. A lover had sung this very music to his beloved, ending each night with the words, "Until tomorrow, Beloved!" And now the beloved was gone — for longer than tomorrow. The music of Raquel's voice added new music to the poetry. "And tomorrow you will not answer me." The most stupid *peón,* the dullest *mestizo,* knew, in company with a great composer and a mystic poet, how that loss could haunt a man.

The faces of the listeners reflected mingled joy and pain, a voluptuous suffering. Raquel's recitation was freighted with longing and despair . . . she spoke for all men and their lost loves. Such depth of emotion was in her voice that every creature present recognized his own lament for the unattainable. The last words were scarcely more than a whisper and the music finished like a small, despairing sigh.

The musicians stilled their instruments, but no one else stirred. At last Fausto stepped up to the platform and led Raquel back to her chair. She saw how the Mexicans continued to gaze at the spot where she had stood. One by one they came alive. One pushed back his hat and wiped his forehead. Another shook his head wonderingly. One man softly slapped the side of his boot and murmured: "Hombre! Hombre!" The women and girls furrowed their narrow foreheads in an effort to hold captive some of the words, to observe a little of the spell to spread it through the drab year to come.

Gabino signaled the musicians, and the man with the accordion began to play a bumpy waltz. The floor soon filled with stodgy, jogging couples.

On Christmas Eve dusk came early. Raquel was glad; she felt she could not endure the tension of waiting much longer. The Mexican guests were gathered at the *ramada* made of mesquite posts roughly thatched with palm leaves and brush. The fires from the barbecue pits and cooking pots sent a red glow into the night. Wood smoke rose like acrid incense.

'I must stay right with the guests the whole time,' Raquel thought. 'We won't breathe freely until that brigand gets his money and goes back across the river.'

Fernando knocked at Raquel's door.

"Don Fausto will not be here. I can serve whenever you are ready."

Raquel took the Bankers and Worden into the dining room where Fernando was serving bowls of soup.

"There will be no supper until after midnight. Christmas Eve is a fast. After midnight we have the feast with all the traditional dishes. Please eat plenty of soup to hold you over!"

"This is a meal in itself," Abby Banker said. "It's fish, isn't it?"

"*Bacalao.* Dried codfish from Point Isabel. It is supposed to bring good luck."

Raquel signaled Fernando to refill the wineglasses. She enjoyed the warmth the claret created in her veins. The wine in the glass she held up against the light was exactly the color of her crêpe-de-chine dress. She felt strange in the new dress with the tight, ankle-length underskirt slit in front. The long tunic flared over it like a bell. A surplice bodice outlined the division of her breasts. Cream lace at the neck of the dress rose into a wired standing collar with points rolled back like the petals of a flower.

'I feel self-conscious in such a fashionable dress,' she thought. Her hair was done in the new French roll. The garnet jewelry she wore set off her pale skin. Myra and the girls were staring at her enraptured.

"Mama," Josefina said, "perhaps you had better change that dress before the General arrives. They say he has a Pullman car full of beautiful ladies, and he might want to carry you off!"

"It's more likely," Raquel said, "that the actors in the *Pastorela* will want to carry us all off if we keep them waiting any longer . . . we really must go now."

The family and their guests sat in armchairs carefully placed in front of the arbor. The Mexicans sat on benches that completed the half-circle. Raquel glanced around her: the audience was mostly women and children. A few older men were scattered about, but all the cowboys except those taking part in the play were absent. Fernando sat importantly near the family.

'By the look on his face,' Raquel thought, 'I know Fausto let him carry a gun. Now he will be happy, in full dress for the occasion!'

The musicians were tuning up their instruments. The night was dusky but not quite dark.

"We are not supposed to look until all the actors are in their places," Raquel said.

"I don't know why it should," Donald Worden said, "but it seems odd to be watching this spectacle in tropical surroundings. We have lost sight of the fact that the original drama took place in desert-like country."

The shepherds were hanging up lanterns from the cross-poles of the arbor and Raquel saw the pretty, soft-eyed Mexican girl who was to represent the Virgin Mary half-reclining on a heap of straw.

"See?" Raquel whispered. "She has a real baby. When I see this primitive play I am always reminded that the Virgin Mary was a simple Jewish girl, probably as brunette as this girl of ours. She seems more human that way than as the pink-and-white image we have conceived."

"Dark and comely . . . that's how the old masters painted her," Abby Banker said. "I wish I could understand all the lines!"

The choristers stepped forward into the light where they formed a semicircle around the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph. All the singers were men, dressed in their best. Those who owned coats wore them with pride. Each singer carried a tall shepherd's crook adorned with a cluster of paper flowers, Christmas-tree ornaments, strings of tinsel, and whatever other pleasing object he owned. Some of the staffs were adorned with small mirrors dangling from bits of ribbon. The singers beat out the time of the plain-song with their crooks, banging them solemnly against the ground.

Olmedo, the blind harper, silenced the other musicians and played most of the accompaniment on his small harp.

"Olmedo knows every word of the play, and woe to anyone who misses so much as a syllable," Raquel whispered.

The Three Wise Men entered bearing their gifts. They were tall, handsome cowboys wearing Stetson hats. Bright *sarapes* were draped over their leather jackets. During the singing that welcomed the Wise Men, Satan appeared, his face blackened, wearing a cured cowhide with the tail left on. Fierce horns were fastened to his head.

"Watch him," Raquel said. "On ordinary days Satan is Lalito, the veterinary, gentlest of men."

Satan capered, coaxed, and cajoled, trying to lure the Wise Men away from the Babe. When his antics appeared to have no effect on the potentates, he discarded the hide and became urbane and suave, tempting them with promises of gold and eternal youth.

The Wise Men shook their heads gravely and replied:

"We are following yonder star!"

There was a slight halt in the music. Raquel glanced over her shoulder. "They nearly always have trouble when it is time for the angel to come down the wire."

During the lull she listened intently for sounds that might indicate what was going on at the edge of the ranch.

'I wonder if I am really feeling the hoofbeats of the herd!' she thought. Beneath her feet she was certain that she felt the ground trembling and vibrating under the pounding of thousands of hoofs. In a few seconds the wind veered and she knew her senses had been right: the gust of wind carried the unmistakable odor of stirred-up dust and cattle-sweat that accompanies every large herd.

'Soon,' she thought, 'everyone will hear the bawling of the steers, hungry and uneasy after being driven by the soldiers.'

The singers repeated the line:

"We are following yonder star!"

A wire was strung between a large tree some twenty feet distant and the inside of the arbor. A small boy dressed as an angel, carrying a large gleaming star on the end of a stick, slid down the wire. The rapidity of the chute turned him purplish brown. He raised his arms slowly to display the angel wings made of infinitesimal plumes of white tissue paper. Then he raised the wand with the star on it and held it shimmering over the little brown baby. All the participants sang:

"Our King is born in Bethlehem."

The play ended as simply as it began. Raquel could see that the Bankers and Worden were touched by the sincerity of the performance.

"I wish Fausto were here," she said. "I shall have to act for him. What time is it, Mr. Banker?" She was amazed at the lateness of the hour. It would be best to have the musicians play for dancing until the supper was served. It would occupy the ranchers. She was sure Fausto did not want them scattered about the place when he appeared with his guest.

Raquel gave the musicians their instructions and then shook hands with all the women.

"Thank you for coming. Until next year!" she said as each one filed by.

"We must go up to the house now," she said. Soledad walked with the three girls. Raquel called her to one side. "Keep them out of sight as much as you can."

When the group reached the house, Raquel sent the Bankers and Worden into the living room to wait. She stood at the front door where she knew Fausto would expect her to be. She had not long to wait. She heard the horses' soft approach. She looked around and saw the famous *tordillo*, the dove-gray stallion, slowed to a ceremonial walk. The man in the saddle loomed mountainous in the dark. Fausto rode beside him on his dainty-footed mare, Joya. Five horsemen followed closely. As she stood on the porch, Raquel watched them dismount. The soldiers of the escort saturated the air with their customary rancid odor.

'They are sewed up in their clothes,' Raquel thought. Their chief must have noticed it too, for he turned, looked around about him and remarked in a slow, thick voice:

"You stay here, boys. You smell better around a campfire than in a drawing room."

He was close enough now for Raquel to see his coarse face. Small, deep-set eyes lit up with a feline splendor in the light that Fernando held up for his master. The General's mustache was turned up à la Kaiser. When he smiled at her, Raquel saw how his lips rolled back exposing puffy bluish gums. 'His bite would give anyone hydrophobia,' she thought.

She looked at Fausto. He answered her question with the tiniest gesture, a sidewise motion of his hand, thumb under and the four fingers spread fanwise.

"My wife," he said.

The General swept off his hat by the greasy cord under his chin. Raquel saw his strong, bushy hair clipped close.

'He does admire the Germans!' she thought.

"Come in, General," she said.

The introductions over, Raquel had a good chance to observe the General at close range. He seemed to be one uninterrupted shade of khaki: hat, face, thick sweater, and riding pants.

'That enormous pistol is part of the man,' she thought. 'He and it are one . . . it is his reason for being.'

Fausto interrupted the conversation.

"What will you have, General?" he said.

"I have very refined tastes," the General said. "I drink only champagne." He smiled widely at the company.

'His smile starts on the points of his teeth,' Raquel shuddered. 'Self-appointed, fatuous beast! He makes himself at home here!'

"Aren't you going to take my picture, Señora?" he asked.

Raquel could scarcely believe her ears, but she recovered herself quickly.

"Mr. Banker has a camera, General, but unfortunately it only works during the daylight! If you had come while the sun was still out . . . "

Raquel saw that he did not miss the thrust.

He got up and walked over to her with his feral gait. "There are other things besides love, Señora, which belong under the cover of the dark! But I regret that you will have no photograph of me . . . last month alone I autographed over two thousand for my admirers!" He stared at the front of Raquel's dress, undressing her with his eyes. She glanced at Fausto. His face was purple. He walked into the hall and summoned Fernando in a dry, peremptory voice. Almost immediately Fernando announced that supper was on the table. The guests followed Raquel into the hall. Fausto was waiting for her. Raquel saw that he had her white lace scarf over his arm. He handed the scarf to her without a word. She put it around her shoulders and crossed it lightly over her breast.

At the table Donald Worden apologized to the General for his lack of fluency in Spanish.

"Even so, Señor Worden," the General made an elaborate bow, "you are more accomplished than I! My English is like the Latin of the village priest: little and bad."

Raquel wondered what means Fausto must have used to convince this man of his safety: he sat at the table with the greatest ease and confidence.

'It must be as Fausto says,' she thought. 'This adventure will give him something to talk about. He is almost pitiable in his desire for the approval of decent people.'

The General relieved the others of any necessity for speech. His monologue grew steadily more dramatic in ratio to the amount of champagne he consumed.

"The Revolution," he said, "our sacred cause, demands, devours, consumes great quantities of money which we, its apostles, pure and stainless, unselfish, must provide!"

'His pauses are to leave room for us to shout, *Viva la Revolución*!' Raquel thought.

"What could be more just, right, and honest than that those who are responsible for the terrible state of democracy today be forced to pay, and pay handsomely, for the support of the glorious revolution?" Once again he looked around the table.

"Do not think for one little moment that I confiscate property, not even from those traitors, enemies of liberty and the people! I give receipts! Orders for payment, signed by me, an authorized agent and worthy representative of the revolution . . . an order for payment when our cause shall have triumphed!"

"The revolution cannot fall short of its aim with you to lead it, General." Fausto's face was sardonic.

The General bowed: "Where I aim, that's where the bullet goes! Would the señoras like me to do some exhibition shooting for them?" He looked hopefully at Raquel.

"All the world knows what a marksman you are, General!" Raquel said. "It is very late, and if you will excuse us, Mrs. Banker and I will retire. My wish for you is that you get what you merit."

"Thank you, Señora! It is true there is no one so likely to choke as he who gargles with olive pits! But who shall escape his destiny?"

The men rose as Raquel and Mrs. Banker got up. The General lurched to his feet. For one awful second

Raquel thought he was going to kiss her hand. She saw him change his mind when he looked at Fausto out of the corner of his eye.

'He's not that drunk!' she thought as she left the room.

IN HER ROOM, dark and quiet, Raquel lay down on the bed with her clothes on. In a short while she heard the soldiers of the escort leave the kitchen and untie the horses.

She peeped through one of the slats of the shutters and saw the General mount with agility.

'I shall not relax until those cattle are on their way to San Antonio and that brute is back in Mexico leading the noble army of the revolution.' She shuddered in the dark. The tension of the day made her nerves painfully taut. Sleep would be impossible for hours.

The moonlight was as bright as day. It cut a wide silver path across the prairies. She watched the soldiers riding in back of their General, stupid *peones* inflamed by the lust to kill, enslaved by the grandiloquent phrases of rabble-rousers like their leader.

'Give them a cause! Any cause at all,' she thought. 'All they want is something to die for!'

Their horses seemed to move with a furtive, muffled tread. The easy seat of men used to the saddle gave the retreating figures a slack, disinterested look, but Raquel knew that not a leaf moved on a tree without their knowledge.

'Silk stockings and a ride in a Pullman car for their women tomorrow!' she thought. Raquel could see them in her mind, drinking *mescal* and eating peanuts, holding the pistols for their men while they scratched out a tune on a guitar.

'And I'm no different!' she thought. 'I'm hoping for something out of the deal, too. Education for the girls, a little security for all of us, and above all – peace of mind for Fausto.'

She walked onto the porch, glad that the Bankers and Worden had retired.

Tired as she was, the perfumed and phosphorescent splendor of the night thrilled her. She leaned against a pillar and listened to the tree toads. She heard steps behind her. Consuelo and Josefina came out of the hall.

'What are you doing up at this hour?" she said. "Where is Soledad?"

"Asleep. So is Myra. But we just couldn't!" Consuelo said.

"Has he gone for good, Mama?" Josefina asked.

"I hope so!" Raquel said. She saw Fausto come around the corner of the house and stop to give low, urgent instructions to Gabino and another man who followed him.

"Are they all right?" Raquel said.

Fausto nodded. She saw that he was white with fatigue.

"Will you sit down with me while I have a glass of wine?" he said.

Raquel gave a hand to each of the girls and followed Fausto to the dining room. Fernando had left a lamp lit.

"The count tallies," he said. "I only hope to God nothing scares them. The pens are flimsy for so many." He handed Raquel the General's bill of sale. "Put this away," he said, and smiled. "It's about as valid as a receipt for City Hall."

"How soon can you get rid of them?" Raquel asked.

"I have to telephone Thornham from Brownsville in the morning. He can take the night train out of San Antonio and be here day after tomorrow. There is nothing to worry about . . . the cattle are in good shape. The hides alone are worth a fortune with the war in Europe."

Raquel watched the color come back to his face as he drank his wine.

"Try to eat something," she said. She put a slice of cold chicken on a piece of bread and handed it to him.

"Will Thornham ship them or have them driven up?" she asked.

Fausto's eyes settled on Raquel; she saw admiration and puzzlement struggling in them.

"How do you know about such things?" he said.

"They certainly can't fly to San Antonio, Fausto."

"He'll ship. He always does. They will be worth more at that end, too. Not worn to skin and bones." He gave her a long, questioning look.

"It was risky," he said. "But it seems worth the chance."

'He is asking me for a word of praise,' Raquel thought. 'Praise from me means something to him now. He has almost made up his mind that it is pleasant to talk to me . . . and he scarcely knows how. For so long he never said anything but "Come to bed." '

"So far, so good," Raquel admitted, "but I shall feel better when the cattle are Mr. Thornham's. I am so restless, Fausto, sleep is out of the question. Do you think it would be all right if the girls and I walked a little?"

"Don't go far from the house," he said. "It's unlikely that there will be trouble. He got what he came for."

The girls seemed to sense Raquel's mood. They kept silent at her side. The late breeze ruffled the grass alongside the white driveway. Groups of silver-leaved coma trees quivered in the moonlight. From the corral came the lonesome bawling of the steers. The high whistle of the cowboys could be heard, soft and clear like a whippoorwill's call, to soothe the nervous beasts. From the other side of the ranch-house a gust of wind brought music from the dance.

'*La Golondrina,*' Raquel thought. 'They are going home now. The girls must have had a dull time with most of the cowboys away guarding the cattle. The cowboys' whistle and the dance music: hypnotics, both of them.' She glanced at the faces of her daughters. Their faces were round and white like moonflowers opening in the dark.

"To some the night is a conspirator . . . to the General and his ilk. To me it is a temptress," she said. "You are like me, susceptible to the magic of the night."

It was good to walk in the night. Good to walk and think over the crowded events of the day. It did not seem like Christmas at all. If destiny favored Fausto's scheme as it seemed to be doing, what changes would it bring to her life? Would there be a common meeting-ground – ever? The love that had been stunted to fit into the little space of desire, not even that was left to them.

'The blank, vacant years of my life have been wiped out,' she thought. 'When destiny begins to move, events tumble over one another thick and fast. What is the answer to these events?'

Without realizing that she did so, she turned and led the way back to the house.

'What,' she thought, 'is the answer? I shall have to have an answer ready!'

As they came near the patio, Raquel saw a small red dot gleaming in the dark. Fausto sat immobile in the patio. As Raquel and the girls came toward him across the courtyard, he rose and tossed away his cigarette. The cigarette landed on the dew-wet bricks with a faint hiss. All sound ceased and time itself stood still. The air was heavy with the scent of flowers, heavy musky smells. The high, sharp odor of orange blossoms floated delicately above the stronger flowers. The few seconds during which the three faced Fausto seemed like a lifetime. The girls, motionless at their mother's side, scarcely seemed to breathe.

Raquel's first impulse was to run. Anywhere. Anywhere at all away from the demanding masculine form and the treacherous flower scents. Where could she run? Where could she hide from this unconscious betrayal by the night and her own longing flesh? She was achingly aware of her husband and painfully conscious of her daughters. All at once a mockingbird burst into a mad outpouring. Traitorous song! A sharp breeze sprang up and Raquel shivered.

Her eyes were on Fausto's face, but it was to the girls that she spoke.

"Go to your room now," she said.

* * *

The iron bars at the window made a shadow design on the sheets of Raquel's bed. She did not know whether it was late night or early morning. Fausto lay still as death beside her, but she knew he did not sleep. The effort of speech seemed too great – and what was there to say? If she had to die, it would not be immediate – and love, all of it, was a constant hovering between life and death. The sweet, black death quickly and painfully achieved, and life regained gradually by a slow lifting of the wings.

Through her drowsiness and inertia, Raquel sensed a sudden alertness spreading through Fausto's body. He placed his arm across Raquel in a warning manner, pressing her down into the pillows as he sat up.

'He is listening to something with every cell in his body,' she thought. She was wide awake instantly. Fausto moved noiselessly to the window and stood there listening. He pulled on his trousers and boots without a sound. He reached for his gun on the chair.

"They've come back," she whispered.

"Sounds like it," he said.

Through her mind flashed the thought: 'The girls! What will happen to them? In the space of nine minutes it is quite possible that there will be nothing left for any one of us to worry about! I have dragged my friends into danger, too; people who would have been safely at home but for me.'

She was conscious of Fausto's whisper: "They are sneaking up from the east to avoid the cowboys at the corral. I've got to warn the Bankers and get Fernando."

"Don't leave me!" Raquel could scarcely utter the words.

"Come with me." Fausto took her hand as they went out the door on tiptoe. He stopped at the door of Mr. and Mrs. Banker's room.

"Go and get the children. Bring the Banker girl to her parents. I take no responsibility for her! But before they kill me, I know what I have to do for mine." Raquel stared at Fausto in horror. "Hurry!" he whispered, "and don't let anyone show a light."

Raquel entered the girls' room and woke Soledad. She sat up instantly.

"Get the girls up and into the dining room. Don't make a light and don't leave them a second."

Soledad had the girls out like a flash.

Raquel woke Myra gently. "Put your slippers on and come with me, Myra. Some drunken cowboys are making a fuss and you will feel safer with your mother and father." She hurried the sleepy girl down the hall and into her parents' room.

Donald Worden was standing in the hall, talking to Fausto in low tones.

"The girls are with Cholly in the dining room," Raquel said.

Fernando had his ear pressed close to the front door, listening.

Fausto came up to him. "Take my rifle and sneak out the back way to warn Gabino . . . they'll try to stampede the cattle. They must have split up into small bunches, because there are not more than five riders in this group."

Fernando slipped out as quietly as his shadow. Raquel moved closer to Fausto and heard the horses' hoofs almost in the front yard. She was surprised that she did not feel terror. She felt instead a cold fury, a murderous calm. The moonlight was so bright that she could see the figures of the mounted men plainly. Fausto was as still as marble. The moonlight etched the muscles of his face. He did not move an eyelash.

Raquel watched the horsemen pull into a huddle and talk in low tones. Their sinister quiet suffocated her. All at once, two of the horses began to rear and drunken yells split the air. A splintering crash deafened Raquel; it seemed to be crashing at her very eardrums. In the still of the night where even the lightest rustle of silk was magnified, the shattering of the empty bottle against the plaster wall of the house was electrifying. The horsemen took aim solemnly and fired at the house. Raquel heard the sickening spat of the bullets as they struck. One of the men began to curse in a loud, whining voice. A tiny movement at her side warned Raquel that Fausto was going to fire. The motion was so swift and smooth that she could scarcely be sure the shot had been fired until she heard the cry from the man who had been hit and saw his gun drop. His four companions spurred their horses and rode into the yard within a few feet of the front steps. Bullets began to hit the wall a foot away from Raquel's head and she crouched down against the wall near the floor. Suddenly there was ominous quiet.

'Now they will make themselves known,' she thought. 'This is the challenge, or a trap.'

"Fausto Hidalgo!" one of the men shouted, "Come out! Come out and speak – if you are not a coward!"

Raquel reached up and put her hand on Fausto's arm. He shook it off, but made no sound.

"All the world is welcome at your table! Everyone shares your celebration!" the voice rang out. "What are we? Dogs?"

Fausto pushed the door open a crack with the toe of his boot. From her crouching position on the floor Raquel could see the men clearly . . . they were less than ten feet away. At her side she felt the quick change in Fausto's body. It seemed suddenly to go heavy and slack. He allowed the door to drift open.

"Fausto!" she whispered frantically. "Kill them! What's the matter with you?" She straightened up and looked at him. If she had felt any terror, it was gone now. If she had to be shot, she did not want to be shot in a cringing position. She stared hard at the figures in the moonlight for a second.

"Who are they, Fausto? Who are they? I have seen them before. I could swear it!"

Fausto shook her off and stepped over the sill onto the porch. Raquel followed him as though they were one flesh.

One of the men moved his horse a step forward when he saw Raquel. Then she recognized him beyond all doubt. She looked carefully at the others. Two of them she had seen before. They were the youths who had flung the mud at her the day she went to the bank for the first time.

Fausto was standing before them, slumped over like a very old man.

"Who are they, Fausto?" Raquel's voice was controlled and calm.

Fausto's voice came from his throat like a death rattle.

"They're mine," he said.

The shame and outrage in Fausto's face made Raquel forget the danger. He was quivering from head to foot. Suddenly he straightened as though stretching out to his full length. He tottered and fell forward. His gun fell at Raquel's feet.

The Mexican who had spoken pointed his gun at Raquel, and she stared into his face.

'He thinks I am going to pick it up,' she thought.

The man at his right silently took aim at Fausto's body. The first one spoke again.

"There is no need," he said. He signaled with his head and the five turned their horses and rode out of the yard.

How long she stood watching their retreating backs Raquel did not know. At last Fausto's noisy breathing brought her back to herself. She knew he would rather be dead than alive. The compassion she felt for him swept every other thought and emotion before it.

If she lived to be older than the Sphinx, she could never forget for one instant the look on Fausto's face when he acknowledged his sons.

'That,' she thought, no longer trying to restrain her tears, 'is how we are all to look before God on our judgment day.'

* * *

It was almost noon of Christmas Day by the time the Bankers and Fernando got the automobile loaded and ready for the trip to Brownsville.

"I am not sure Fausto can stand the trip," Raquel said.

"You have no choice," Worden said. "He has to be in town to have the doctor."

"You are right, of course. I am frightened by all that must be done. He is quite helpless."

Fernando and Donald Worden carried Fausto to the back seat of the car. They wrapped him in a robe and placed pillows behind his head. Raquel got in beside him. Soledad sat on the floor at their feet.

"Donald will take care of the girls and bring them to town in the carriage . . . please don't worry about them, Raquel. You look ready to collapse any minute as it is." Abby Banker turned to face Raquel in the back seat. "The ride will not take long and the doctor may be able to do a lot for him."

"Get Gabino, Fernando," Raquel said. "I have something to say to him."

The girls were standing by the side of the car staring at their father's altered face. One eye was shut and the left corner of his mouth was pulled down. Raquel took her handkerchief and wiped off the saliva that ran from it.

The foreman came up, red-eyed and sleepless. He looked at Fausto briefly, then turned his face away.

"The cattle, Gabino . . . you know what they cost Don Fausto. The man from San Antonio will be here sometime tomorrow."

"Leave it to me, Señora . . . "

Raquel gave him her hand.

Fernando stepped on the running board of the car and took hold of the top with one hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" Raquel demanded. "You can't ride all the way into town like that! You must drive the carriage for the girls."

Fernando looked straight into her eyes.

"Not even an earthquake, Doña Raquel, can dislodge me from my *patrón's* side. I would go with him even if they dismembered me and dragged the pieces from a rope's end behind this car."

"If you are ready, Mr. Banker, we might as well start," Raquel sighed. In her heart she was glad that Fernando was going with her.

The sky was overcast. Fleecy, woolly clouds at dawn presaged sunless weather.

Fausto seemed quite peaceful. His head nodded over from time to time on Raquel's shoulder. She sponged his face occasionally with toilet ammonia and gave him sips of water from a flask.

'Christmas Day!' Raquel thought.

The ride seemed mercifully short to her. The slow, jogging trek in the carriage would have been agony for Fausto. Mr. Banker and Fernando carried him to his bedroom and undressed him. She watched Fernando's deft hands as he smoothed the pillows under Fausto's head and thought again how glad she was that he had come.

Mr. Banker led her from the room.

"Sit down for a minute until the doctor gets here. Now tell me what is the first thing I can do for you."

"Fausto was to telephone his buyer in San Antonio this morning about the cattle."

"I'll go right out to the house and telephone at once. What is his name?"

"It's Thornham, I don't know the initials. He is one of the biggest buyers in the state."

"I'll get him. He's to take the night sleeper out of San Antonio?"

Raquel nodded.

"I'll meet him in the morning and drive him out to the ranch," Banker said. "You had better go, too, if you feel up to it."

"I suppose that is the way I can help Fausto most." She got up and took his hand. "Anything I try to say to you will sound inadequate . . . you have been a rock to me."

"We have done very little. As soon as the cattle are shipped, you can rest. You certainly need it. Perhaps your husband's head will be clearer by then. When he knows that everything has been attended to, it may ease the shock and strain a little. He is very strong. I think he will be well again."

"You are a very comforting person," Raquel said.

When she closed the door behind him, she went to her bedroom to try to steady her whirling head. She was covered with dust and her back ached. She sat down on the edge of the bed feeling heavy and depressed. Her body seemed unusually cool to her and she felt a sudden sharp cramp. Her heart began to beat rapidly: she had forgotten.

'The excitement!' she thought. 'Every human emotion was used up last night. I am too drained even to experience relief!'

Friday afternoon Mrs. Banker came in to see if Raquel needed anything. The girls were staying with Myra, coming in once a day to see their father.

"Has his speech cleared up any?" Abby Banker said.

Raquel shook her head.

"He has never been talkative, but his efforts to speak are heart-breaking. He halts and stumbles."

"It will pass, Raquel, believe me! Forgive me for speaking like this, but don't you think that now perhaps things will be so that you can finish out your lives together? I scarcely knew the man, but he seemed to be trying in some oblique kind of way to live up to you. There is a passionate kind of bond that runs between the two of you like an electric current . . . anyone can see it when you are together."

"It is very late," Raquel said. "And he has had two of the hardest blows a man can be called upon to bear . . . three, if you count the fact that I went away to live somewhere else."

"That was nothing, Raquel! It taught him what you meant to him. You are so young. So feminine and appealing. Every man who sees you takes to you at once. I want to see you happy, and I think Fausto is your happiness."

Raquel did not reply for a long time.

"Perhaps you are right," she said at last. "I was so headlong in my passion for him, I never knew whether he truly loved me or was even capable of loving as I loved. I wanted to find all my joy in him, to live in him, and for him only all the days of my life. He was the beginning and the end of my whole existence . . . in reality, I had nothing but youthful dreams to bring him." She shook her head. "How long it takes to learn! What a slow process it is! Only when the grave yawns in front of us . . ."

"No matter what, Raquel, life holds great happiness for you. You are destined for it."

"A woman's happiness is in being a wife. There is not much to look forward to for me as a wife. But I do not expect to be unhappy . . . I have had a great deal. Both the good and the bad have been rich experience."

"I hope you are not going to take the word of one small-town doctor as the final word on your physical fitness for the normal life of a wife and mother! That is a question for the finest specialists to decide."

Raquel smiled faintly.

"I think God will decide. Time can change every situation. Perhaps the doctor was right when he issued his warning. Certainly he was sincere. Six months ago a pregnancy might have killed me. Just now I am not concerned about myself: I want to do what I can for Fausto . . . he has had so pitiably little. And without ever knowing it, he has given me everything. The world holds a lot for me . . . I know that. But if Fausto had given me that one thing I desired more than anything else in the world, the finest gift from a strong man to a woman — tenderness — I would at this very moment be smothered in the cocoon of his love. Living the old life, unaware of the world around us. Instead, Fausto's actions have forced me to become a reasoning, self-reliant human being. No matter what happens, I am not afraid to face the future. Even if Fausto should die, I have something I never expected to have in this world: I have the memory that he tried to do something unselfish."

About nine o'clock in the evening, Raquel sent Soledad out on the streetcar to bring the girls home. She did not like the flush on Fausto's face. A white waxy groove was forming over the bridge of his nose. He was quiet and his speech seemed less thick and painful. His good eye was feverishly bright and followed her every movement. She brought her chair closer to the bed and bathed his face with ice water. He turned his head as though looking for something.

"This?" Raquel held up Thornham's letter with the check in it. His fingers were awkward and he could not turn the check over.

"I . . . have . . . to . . . "

Raquel knew that he was trying to endorse the check. She got a pen for him and held the check steady on a book. It amazed her to see the clear, painstaking signature emerge slowly and painfully down to the *rubrica*, the Spanish flourish beneath the name.

"Take this." He spoke haltingly and as though searching for words.

'This is it,' Raquel thought. 'Now he will ask me to take care of this house, to keep it polished and showy as he would have it. God knows that after the agony I have seen on this man's face, I cannot refuse him.'

"Take this. Bring your father here. From Mexico."

Swift shame flooded her. Sobs shook her and she laid her head on the side of the bed, more in remorse than in grief. The fumbling touch of Fausto's hand on her hair loosed a torrent of tears. After a time she was able to speak.

"Father is resting quietly wherever he is, Fausto. This time it's bread for the living. The dead have no need of it."

Fausto moved his head slowly.

"You know . . . I'm going."

Raquel took his hand.

"Listen to me, Fausto . . . and try to answer me. I don't want to hurt you, but do you want to lie with Laura and the little boy?"

Fausto turned his head to see her better. For a long time he gazed at her. The red seemed to be subsiding in his face. His voice when it came was faint, but quite clear.

"No," he said. "A coffin is too narrow a bed to share with anyone."

Raquel felt the surprisingly strong pressure of his fingers on her own.

"I have never deserved you, Raquel." His voice trailed off in a whisper so faint she could scarcely believe she had heard the words.

"I'll be right back." She leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Fernando must go for Doctor MacAllister."

Fausto was trying to say something:

"And Father Francis."

* * *

When she came out of her bedroom the day after Fausto's burial, Raquel saw that Fernando and Soledad stood ready to put the bags into the carriage. The girls were quiet and self-absorbed. They wore their navy-blue middy suits.

'I did not wear mourning for my father and neither the children nor I shall wear it for Fausto. I mourned for Fausto when he was alive. He is closer to me now than at any time in our lives,' she thought. 'Even death is not too much of a price for the precious jewel of understanding, finally reached, even for so brief a moment.'

She looked around the house quickly.

"The piano went this morning?"

Fernando nodded. "We'll pass it on the road."

"It is nice to know that this place will be in the hands of someone we know," she said. "I don't feel badly about it, now that it is no longer ours. It will be well suited to Mr. Worden's life. If his deep-water project at Point Isabel goes through, it will keep him here most of the year. It will be good to see this place come into its own."

"It's too big," Soledad said. "The ranch is better."

Raquel smiled. How many years of prayers and hopes had Soledad dedicated to the idea of some day living at the ranch? It was indeed a small reward for her years of golden devotion, Raquel thought.

'I will get a younger woman in for the heavy work . . . and a boy for Fernando to train. It shocks me to realize that they have grown old . . . we have taken them so for granted!'

Deep in her thoughts, Raquel looked out the window of the slowly moving carriage. She thought of that other journey in a carriage when her father brought her to Brownsville. Could it be only fifteen years ago? Everything she saw reminded her of Fausto. For no reason at all, she suddenly saw before her the shape of his foot, the high arch of his instep in the beautiful handmade boots he always wore. She thought of his quick, flaring temper . . . the wall he was always raising higher and higher about himself, to ward off hurts.

'Instead of taking my life, he gave me life. From him I learned not to expect so much from people — and to be thrilled at the smallest sign of goodness in them.' She wondered if women of all bloods loved after the manner of the Spanish blood: intensely, unalterably, and with a fiercely exclusive fidelity. She hoped no human being ever loved that way more than once. She did not see how anyone could. 'Like all supreme things, it exacts too great a toll.' She put her elbow on the side of the carriage and rested her chin in the palm of her hand.

Josefina's voice roused her.

"Mama . . . "

"Yes?"

"Are you going to keep on teaching?"

"After we are settled, I intend to go right on."

"But how will you get there? The ranch is very far."

When she replied, Raquel's voice was soft and faraway. "I shall buy an automobile," she said. "And drive it!"

THE END

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Continued from front flap

was a political boundary only, and many women in southern Texas spent their lives in the narrow, luxurious seclusion of the Latin home, their sole function that of childbearer and mistress of the hearth. Raquel's husband was more demanding than most. He longed for a son, and the presence of his daughters only reminded him of his own inadequacy. Time and again Raquel risked her life to cater to his every whim and desire. A woman should produce male heirs, she should be beautiful, and her dowry should be spent as her husband desires. Yet Fausto failed to reckon with the one talent which, skillfully used by a woman of spirit and perseverance, finally beat him at his own game. How Raquel emerged from her physical and mental confinement and grew to independence and maturity is the story of a romantic time and place; but more than that, it is the revealing story of a woman's life.

Jacket by John Alan Maxwell

MARY LASSWELL

Mary Lasswell spent the formative years of her youth in Brownsville, Texas — the Brownsville of which she writes in "Bread for the Living." It was then a picturesque town, undiscovered by industry or chain stores. The *pipero* still sold water from a barrel mounted between two wheels and drawn by a burro. The *panadero* still carried his huge basket of bread on his head through the streets. The language of the town was Spanish, and English was spoken only when it was unavoidable. Mexican money was acceptable in all the stores, and *merienda,* the four o'clock coffee and sweet bread, was an institution.

Border life made a lasting impression on Mrs. Lasswell. At the age when most girls were reading "The Little Colonel" stories, she was learning about the dickerings of Mexican generals; the intrigues of Mexican politicians and aristocrats; the industry of Mexican women who supported their families by making lace and candies; the stories of romance and banditry supplied by matriarchs from their rocking chairs. These refugees taught Mary Lasswell her first Spanish songs and poems, and introduced her to the stories in their well-worn, paper-bound books from Spain. As a result, she is bilingual, and writes about Border people with the authority of one who has known them well, and enjoyed them fully.